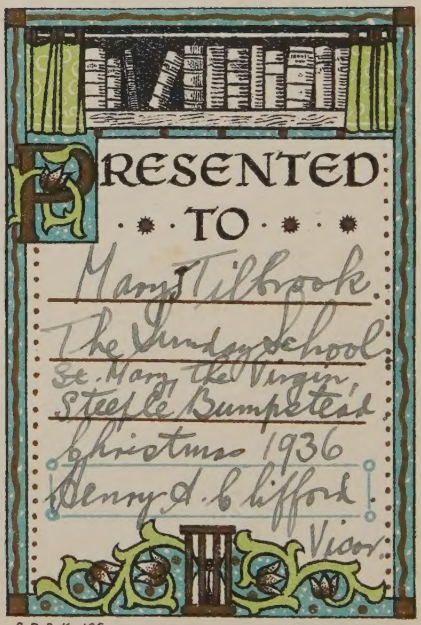
THE PRISON VALLEY

ROWE



S.P.C.K. 166

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

THE PRISON VALLEY

The Giant Cliffs.

THE PRISON VALLEY

OR

WALLED IN BY GIANT CLIFFS

BY

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AUTHOR OF

'THE ISLAND MINE,'

'THE WHITE PRINCE OF THE INCAS,'

&c., &c.

LONDON

THE EPWORTH PRESS

J. ALFRED SHARP

First Edition, 1930

Made and Printed in Great Britain by H. E. Warne Ltd.,
St. Austell, Cornwall

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE PRISON VALLEY,
DRAWN BY HAL SPENCER.

THE PRISON VALLEY

CHAPTER I

TRAPPED IN AN ALPINE VALLEY

Four young men were carefully picking their way through a narrow, boulder-strewn pass in the Pennine or Valais Alps—the most elevated of the whole Alpine system—in south-west Switzerland. On either hand towered mighty and practically perpendicular walls of solid rock, several hundred feet high.

'We are almost at the end of the pass now, gentlemen,' observed the leading man, who, from his picturesque attire, was evidently a guide. 'It is just round that bend.'

He spoke in French.

'Thank goodness for that, Aloys,' replied one of the other three, who were just as evidently tourists. 'I'm about ready to drop with fatigue.'

'You wouldn't be, Hal, if you saw a chamois suddenly come round the bend, I'll go bail,' laughed another, speaking in English.

All three tourists hailed from old England.

'True for you, Dick,' grinned the last of the quartet. 'It would be the chamois that would be most likely to *drop*—with a bullet from him.'

All four young men had alpenstocks in their right hands, and magazine rifles hanging loosely by the slings on their right shoulders, while Hal, otherwise Harry, Spencer, and Dick Howden each had a dead chamois dangling down his back, over his knapsack, testifying that they had already had fair sport.

The words were barely off the lips of the last speaker, who was Dick's younger brother, Tom, when an eagle appeared slowly and majestically cleaving the strip of blue sky that showed between the two towering cliffs hemming them in.

It was almost vertically over the bend the guide had referred to, and all four young men simultaneously sighted it.

With one accord, the three young Englishmen grasped their rifles, brought the butt-ends to their shoulders, and took aim at the proud bird. But Hal Spencer's piece spoke first, although the two other reports blended the instant after. And, shot through the body by one or more of the three marksmen, the eagle turned a complete somersault, then fell like a stone into the pass beyond the bend.

'Glory!' shouted Dick; and all four young men ran eagerly forward round the bend.

As they did so, there came an alarming 'crack' from the summit of the left-hand cliff, the sound mingling with the echoes the discharge of their rifles had awakened, and down showered a number of detached fragments of rock almost upon their heads.

Had any of the fragments struck one of the party, he would probably never have known on this side of the grave what had hit him. Some of the pieces of rock, bursting like bomb-shells on striking the ground, sent equally deadly splinters hurtling around.

All cast startled glances aloft. There came another and much louder crack from the cliff-top.

'Run!' screamed Aloys Reding, the guide. 'Run for your lives! A landslip!'

The four young men ran their fastest towards the mouth of the pass, not twenty feet farther on, even as there followed a rumble overhead like near thunder, and the whole face of the cliff immediately behind them, on the left-hand side, moving bodily forward, crashed against the opposite wall of the narrow pass.

A cloud of dust enveloped them, and some falling stones rattled upon the ground at their

feet ; then all was still once more, save for the echoes again and again repeated.

The four men, with the fear of death strong upon them, raced out of the jaws of the pass into a wide, open, park-like valley. None of them had waited to snatch up the dead eagle which lay in their path. It was now buried under tons of the fallen rock.

Forty or fifty yards out in the valley all four pulled up, and, heaving deep sighs of relief, turned and looked back into the pass. All was as silent once more within it as the grave it had so nearly been to them, but for a few moments they could see nothing within its gaping jaws on account of the thick fog of dust that hung over everything.

Then, as the dust slowly settled, they saw that the pass was completely closed at the bend. The cliff on one side, having moved almost solidly forward, now rested against the opposite cliff.

No passage any longer existed, and the united walls of rock rose up, beetling, to the height of fully three or four hundred feet.

' Merciful powers ! What a narrow escape we had of being buried alive ! ' gasped Tom Howden, wiping the cold perspiration from his forehead.

' Or dead,' said Hal Spencer. ' I suppose

the cliff that slipped was undermined by springs, and our shots within the confined space gave it just the required impulse.'

'Just so! Avalanches are often brought down by a mere shout disturbing the air, I believe,' sighed Dick Howden.

'But—but—do you not comprehend, gentlemen?' cried the guide, excitedly. '*We are walled up inside the valley—we are shut in completely!* That pass was the only way out of it. There is no other outlet from here. We are imprisoned in the valley!'

'*There is no other way out!*' The three young Englishmen gazed at him in utter consternation.

'None, gentlemen! Look around you—search the valley all round, as I and my uncle and my cousin have done ever so many times—and you will find nothing but unclimbable cliffs, hundreds of feet high, everywhere. There is not a break anywhere else in the great wall of rock that shuts in this valley!'

'Great Scott!' groaned Tom Howden. 'Then we are likely to be shut in here for goodness knows how long—until someone comes to the top of the cliffs and discovers our predicament!'

He and his brother and Hal Spencer, looking blankly around the valley, saw that it was

ringed round by an unbroken wall of rock nowhere less than two or three hundred feet high, and in places rising to nearly a thousand feet. And the encircling cliffs everywhere, also, either beetled or looked as sheer and vertical as the walls of a house, so that they were apparently unscalable!

'Surely we can get up *somewhere*, Aloys?' said Hal.

'You will find it impossible to do so, gentlemen, I assure you,' groaned the guide. 'My uncle and my cousin, who live here all the summer, as I told you, have tried repeatedly with me to find a place where it might be possible to climb up with the help of ladders, and we could not.'

'This is a nice state of things. We may be penned up inside here then, for weeks, or even months. You said few persons ever come in this direction?'

'That is so, Monsieur Spencer. We are prisoners, with my uncle and my cousin, for goodness only can say how long. Fortunately, with their flocks and herds there will be no fear of our starving, and there is a lake of fresh water, with streams which flow out underground. None of the subterranean water-courses, though, will serve as outlets for us. They——'

'Hands up, the four of you! or we'll fill you with lead!' interrupted a strange, truculent voice, in French.

The four young men wheeled in surprise and fresh alarm, to behold three scowling, evil-looking fellows, attired, however, in the picturesque garb of honest Alpine herdsmen.

All three were covering the Englishmen and their guide with levelled rifles!

CHAPTER II

THREE SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS

'WHO and what are you? What do you mean by holding us up like this?' asked the guide quickly, in as much astonishment as consternation. 'I am Aloys Reding, the nephew of the shepherd, Franz Ebel, who has the châlet here. Where are he and my cousin, Louis?'

'It's all right, friend. We've nothing to fear from them,' growled one of the three strangers, again speaking in French. 'They're only tourists with a guide. That's all right, guide! If you are the nephew of Franz Ebel, you and the young gentlemen are welcome. We've bought this valley and all the stock in it from Ebel, and he and his son have cleared out—gone back to live in Liddes.'

'What! You've bought the place from my uncle—have taken over his stock! Since when?'

'Oh, only since yesterday.'

'Since yesterday!'

'But yes.'

'It is certainly very strange.'

'Why should it be? Put up your rifles, friends. These gentlemen are all right. But what's happened, gentlemen? We heard a noise like thunder in the pass just after we heard your shots. What did ye fire at? And did ye shoot an avalanche?'

This with a grin.

'We shot an eagle, and also brought down one of the sides of the pass,' answered Hal Spencer. 'We are all of us, now penned up inside the valley, for better or worse. There's no way of getting out anywhere, so the guide tells us. Anyhow, the pass behind us is closed for good and all.'

'What! The pass is closed?'

'See for yourselves.'

The three strangers, running forward, peered inside the mouth of what had been so lately a pass, and was now a cul-de-sac, or blind alley.

'*Tonnerre!*'

'*Sapristi!*'

'Name of a pipe! We are prisoners, then! We cannot get out of the valley?'

'Not unless you can build an aeroplane or climb the cliffs,' said Dick Howden.

'What are your names, friends?' asked the

guide, in a strained voice, eyeing the three strangers narrowly and suspiciously.

'Our names! What do you want to know them for? Oh, of course, you must call us by our names, now we are friends, and likely to be shut up here together for some time. Ah, well, you can call me Jacques—him Anatole, and him Jean.'

His companions, grinning ingratiatingly, nodded as the spokesman signified them.

'Jacques what?' asked Aloys.

'Jacques will do,' was the sharp rejoinder, with a half-scowl. 'Ah! well, gentlemen, it's no use crying over spilt milk, is it? If we can't get out of the valley, we can't, and so may as well make the best of it. Come along to our châlet! We were at supper. You will, no doubt, be glad of something to eat and drink.'

'We shall, indeed; thank you,' replied Hal Spencer.

The three strangers, whispering together, turned and led the way towards a low log-cabin or 'lean-to', built against the cliff foot, close by.

The valley was about three-quarters of a mile long and half a mile wide. There was a small lake in the middle. Rich grass covered it everywhere, and dotted here and there were

clumps of bushes and dense groves of spruce firs, oaks, and birches

In the open spaces the young Englishmen now saw some cattle and horses, as well as sheep and goats, cropping the grass, while also wandering around were pigs, fowl, ducks, geese, and turkeys. Houses and pens for this farm-stock, as well as a little kitchen-garden, lined the base of the cliffs for some distance beyond the châlet.

'Be on your guard, gentlemen,' whispered Aloys Reding. 'I distrust these fellows. I cannot believe their story. Why should my uncle sell his stock and rights here to them so suddenly? They do not look like men who could give him his price. And they are not Swiss; they are Frenchmen. Moreover, they are wearing my uncle's and my cousin's best clothes. I can swear to the garments.'

'Your uncle and his son may have thrown in their spare clothing with their stock-in-trade,' said Dick Howden.

Aloys shook his head.

'Not likely! And then the way they received us. They acted like brigands! If we had any brigands in the Alps, I should say these were such.'

'They certainly acted oddly for simple herdsmen,' concurred Tom.

'Well, forewarned is forearmed,' said Hal, who was a particularly strong, hefty young fellow, standing an inch or so over six feet. 'We ought to be able to guard against any treachery; though, for my part, I don't think we have any reason to fear it.'

They followed their three hosts inside the miserable, gloomy little châlet. It consisted of two rooms, the inner one being set against the face of the cliff, and only entered through the outer one. At one end of the outer room was a rock-built fireplace.

On the table was spread an exceptionally good supper for frugal and abstemious Alpine herdsmen. There were platters of cold roast mutton and of fried eggs and bacon, with half a big suet dumpling, bread, and even butter and cheese—which last two articles are generally considered by the peasantry too precious for personal use, and reserved for market—as well as several opened bottles of the wine of the country.

'Sit down, and eat and drink your fill, gentlemen,' said the fellow Jacques, with well-affected heartiness. 'My friends and I had just finished.'

Thanking their hosts, and pretending to feel quite at home, the three young Englishmen and their guide sat down at the table, and

were soon eating heartily of the ample fare before them.

'Don't be sparing with the wine, gentlemen. No doubt you'll pay us handsomely for our hospitality, and there are plenty more bottles in the store. You'll excuse me and my friends. We've got to attend to our stock.' And he and his companions went out of the hut.

'I don't know what to make of it at all,' said Aloys. 'My uncle would never sell out like that, and——'

'Oh, shut up, Aloys! The fellows are all right, I've no doubt,' said Hal Spencer. 'They can't be brigands.'

'I'm not so sure about that, Monsieur.'

'Anyhow, we needn't fear them, I'm pretty sure. And what we've chiefly got to worry about is how we are going to get out of this prison valley back to Martigny.'

It was getting dark outside now, and shortly after Jacques and his two companions re-entered the hut and lit lamps. Then all seven men discussed in the friendliest manner—the utmost *bonhomie*—ways and means by which the visitors might get out of the valley on the following day. It was decided that the only thing to be done was to make a complete tour of the encircling cliffs on the morrow, and see

whether these could not possibly be climbed at some point by means of ladders.

'We can easily make the ladders, of course, from the spruce firs we saw,' said Tom Howden.

Jacques insisted on the four visitors having the inner room for the night, and he and his fellow-herdsmen sleeping on the skins of sheep and goats in the outer apartment. There were three bunks, furnished with coarse, but clean, bedding, in the inner room, and the three Englishmen were given these, while Aloys Reding was made up a 'shakedown' with skins on the floor.

Hal, Dick, and Tom had barely laid their heads upon their respective pillows when they were fast asleep, tired out as they were with their long day's tramp through the Alps, hunting the chamois. But Aloys Reding, their guide, was kept awake with grave suspicion of their three hosts, and kept starting up at every sound he heard in the outer room.

There was no lock or fastening of any kind upon the communicating door, which was strongly, if rudely, made, however, and he felt tempted more than once to rise and push a heavy chest, that occupied one of the corners of the room, against it. But the noise would be bound to waken his employers.

He had taken the precaution of bringing their four rifles and all their other belongings into the bedroom.

Oh, how slowly, painfully slowly, the night passed! Aloys thought it would never end. He repeatedly crept to the door, and listened, believing the trio outside were moving, and about to steal in and attack him and his sleeping companions.

CHAPTER III

EXAMINING THE CLIFFS

It was with great relief that the guide beheld the grey light of dawn entering through the little side-window.

Rising softly, he noiselessly opened the door communicating with the outer room, and saw Jacques and the two other self-styled herdsmen still fast asleep on their shake-downs.

When he turned round, he found Hal Spencer was awake.

'Up already, Aloys! The top of the morning to you! What say you to slipping out, leaving the others asleep, and having a dip in the lake? I'd like a swim before breakfast.'

'Very good, monsieur,' Aloys whispered back. 'Let us take our rifles and bandoliers with us. We might have some sport after your swim. There are wild fowl and marmots and hares in the valley.'

Hal enjoyed a swim in the lake, but Aloys would not enter the water, contenting himself with merely washing his face and hands. He

preferred to remain ashore and keep an eye on the châlet, although he did not even hint why to the young Englishman.

They had no luck in the shooting line, the only birds they saw being uneatable. The guide, however, reassured Hal that as a rule, there was plenty of game, both winged and four-footed, to be found in the valley.

When they returned to the châlet they found two of their hosts—Anatole and Jean—cooking bacon and eggs, and boiling coffee for breakfast, and the two Howden brothers hobnobbing with Jacques, who was as genial as the night before. Jacques, greeting Hal cordially, endorsed Aloys Reding's assurance that plenty of sport was to be had in the valley, from the little he himself knew of it.

All seven of them sat down together to breakfast, but Jacques was the only one of the three hosts who talked at all. Anatole and Jean kept as mum as deaf mutes the whole time—never by any chance put in a word, and only nodded and grinned when Hal or one of the Howdens tried to draw them into the conversation.

Aloys, too, kept very quiet, hardly saying a word.

'Well,' observed Dick Howden, towards the end of the meal, 'I suppose we had better

make the round of the cliffs immediately after breakfast, and see if there's no place where we can climb out.'

'We certainly don't want to be stuck here indefinitely,' said Tom. 'I should think we ought to be able to find some spot at least where there are ledges not too far apart and in tiers, so to speak, or one above another, where we could get up by using ladders.'

Aloys Reding shook his head in confirmed disbelief that they would come across any such scalable point.

The three Frenchmen were naturally as anxious to find an outlet from the valley as their visitors, and so, leaving the breakfast things to be washed up later, the seven men set out upon their tour of inspection.

All took their rifles and bandoliers with them, in the hope also of some sport *en route*, and because Aloys declared he had seen bears in the valley on a previous visit he had paid it.

The valley was of roundish form and only about two and a half miles in circumference, so they could easily make the circuit of it in an hour, or less. They struck at once to the left, or southward, skirting the base of the mighty cliffs from the châlet itself.

Rising above them in an immense precipice, the rock in places slightly slanted outward or

backward, but at far too steep an angle to permit of the most expert rock-climber scaling it. For the most part, however, the cliff was either perfectly vertical like a wall, or beetled, with no sign of a ledge or shelf upon its face.

About midway between the châlet and the blocked-up pass by which they had entered, they came to a cleft, or deep indentation in the face of the cliff. It was about fifteen feet wide at the mouth, and gradually narrowed.

The three young Englishmen, running eagerly inside it, scanned its end and two enclosing walls in search of a crack or channel, or a sufficiently broken, stair-like place where it would be possible to clamber to the top. But the wall went up almost vertically, practically unbroken anywhere by crevice or ledge.

The recess, or bay, went in about sixty or seventy feet, and was some seven or eight feet wide at its termination—that is, at the base of the cliffs. At the summit it widened slightly, but nowhere to more than twenty feet.

The bottom was on practically the same level as the valley outside, but was piled high, and thus slightly raised, in some places by boulders and other debris that had fallen

from the enclosing walls at some time or another.

'No hope of an outlet here,' cried Tom Howden, after exploring the little bay to its innermost depth. 'A bird could hardly find a resting-place upon the walls.'

'Its walls are certainly lower than the cliffs outside,' observed Hal Spencer. 'They cannot be much more than two hundred feet high.'

'About that,' agreed Dick Howden. 'But of course, as there are no ledges, we cannot hope to get up.'

They left the little bay and went on, examining the cliffs facing on the valley. Foot by foot and yard by yard, did they inspect the precipice as they skirted its base, and came to the blocked-up pass.

That was as impregnable as the bay they had just examined, and so they passed on around the valley. Proceeding slowly, they scanned the face of the crags first from the base, and then, backing some yards into the valley, ran their eyes up to the towering summit.

Here and there were scattered boulders—some of these mighty fragments, indeed, scores of tons in weight—and other litter that had fallen from the top. They would mount

on these heaps to get a better view of the giant walls. But all to no purpose ; no way up presented itself.

Continuing on round the valley to the western side, they encountered several more deep and narrow little bays, or indentations, but each, on exploration, was found to be as unclimbable as the cliffs outside.

Presently they espied a ledge about thirty feet up, upon which it would be possible to stand a second ladder. Above that point the rock protruded, though, and so a third ladder up its face was out of the question.

In another place were found two ledges, one close above the other, so that they might easily be mounted to with ladders ; but again the rock over them either beetled (that is, overhung), or went straight up, like the side of a house, to a height no third ladder would reach.

Right round the valley to the northern side they all went, still most carefully and minutely inspecting the cliffs, and every cleft, or indentation, in these. But everywhere they found the rocky walls were pretty much the same.

In no place was there a regular succession of ledges or shelves, one above another, which would enable them to ascend to the summit

by a series of ladders. And nowhere, either, were there any zig-zag cracks, or yet was the face of the precipice sufficiently gentle in slope, or broken, to afford a chance of getting up.

Bare of all vegetation, too, the mighty rock-walls rose up on all sides starkly, like a giant's prison walls, which, indeed, they were as regarded the seven occupants of that cliff-girt valley.

'It's impossible to get out; that's plain,' growled Jacques, as they came round to the châlet again; 'so it's no good trying, that I can see.'

'Oh, never say die!' said Hal Spencer.

'Well, we've no great call to complain of our prison for the present, at least,' remarked Dick Howden. 'We might have been stuck in a worse hole.'

'True for you, Dick,' smiled Tom. 'We ought to be able to pass the time pleasantly enough here until a rescue party comes. Our friends in Martigny are sure to be anxious, when we do not return, and send out search parties to scour the Alps all round for us. They're bound to find us sooner or later.'

Jacques and his two fellow-Frenchmen exchanged startled glances.

'I am not quite sure about that, monsieur,'

put in their guide, who did not fail to observe the looks that passed between their three hosts. ' This valley lies far out of the ordinary tracks taken by Alpine climbers or travellers crossing into or from Italy, and the whole of these Pennine ranges might be searched for months, if not years, without any one lighting upon us here.'

Jacques smiled reassuringly upon his two fellow-countrymen, who seemed much relieved.

' Crusoed nowhere near the sea ! ' laughed Hal.

' Marooned on a continent ! I never heard the like ! ' grinned Tom.

CHAPTER IV

WAS IT ATTEMPTED MURDER?

'AH!' suddenly exclaimed Dick Howden. 'How odd that I should not have remembered it until now! Our predicament puts me in mind of a story I read years ago, when I was a boy at school. It was by Captain Mayne Reid, and was of two young Germans and a Hindoo guide, who were shut up for ever so long inside just such an ungetoutable valley as this, in the Himalaya Mountains in India.'

'That so? And the characters were shut up in a valley like this?' asked Hal Spencer eagerly, with keen interest. 'Then how did they get out? The author would hardly leave them there at the end of the story.'

'The story, I recollect, was in two parts,' replied Dick, while all listened intently and hopefully. 'The first part was called "The Plant-Hunters," as the two young Germans were after rare plants, and the second was called "The Cliff-Climbers."'

'Oh!' interjected Hal, disappointedly, 'then, I suppose, as they were cliff-climbers, they scaled the cliffs somewhere—a thing *we* can't do.'

'No, they didn't. The cliffs were just like these here, impossible to get up even with ladders. They got two or three ladders, I remember, up on to ledges, which happened to be one above another. But they couldn't get right up.'

'Well, how *did* they get out?' demanded his brother impatiently. 'I presume they were rescued in some way.'

'They were eventually, but let me tell the tale in my own way. When they found ladders were of no use, they made a balloon. Don't ask me to describe how they did so; I couldn't remember. But that, too, was a failure. It wouldn't carry any one of them, if I remember rightly, and I have a notion that it either caught fire or flew away all on its own. I don't quite recall which, and it doesn't matter.'

'Of course not!' grunted Tom. 'Do get on.'

'After that they made a big kite, and managed to fly it, with a long, stout rope attached, over the lowest cliffs, in the hope that it would lodge somewhere securely and enable one of them to swarm up the rope. I

believe the guide, the Hindoo, who was the lightest man, nearly broke his neck by climbing some way up the rope, when it stuck temporarily—only to be dragged loose by his weight.'

'Then *how* did they get out? Don't keep us on tenterhooks, Dick, as you love us,' implored Hal Spencer. 'For goodness sake, tell us no more of their adventures now, but how they were rescued.'

'How impatient you are! They snared some storks, which flew into the valley, and found brass labels, I think, attached to their legs, with "The Zoo, Calcutta," engraved thereon. So they wrote messages, telling of their predicament, tied them on to the storks' legs, and then let the birds go. The storks flew back to the Zoo at Calcutta, the messages were read there, and men were sent with ropes to the top of the cliffs to haul the trio up. And that was the end of the story.'

'H'm!' commented Hal. 'A rather tame way of getting them out of their difficulty. I had hopes they devised some means of escape, or of letting their friends know of their plight, that we might also adopt No likelihood of storks, or any such birds, coming here, for us to tie messages on *their* legs! And it would not be much good, I am afraid, snaring any

wild birds and attaching letters to *them*—not in this wild, unfrequented region. Still, we *might* try it.'

'We could attach long ribbons or strips of cloth to the birds' legs,' said Dick. 'Then, if any one saw them, he'd be bound to shoot them, to learn what it meant.'

'Gee! That's not at all a bad idea. We'll try it if we can think of nothing better.'

'Your story of the "Cliff-Climbers," Dick,' observed Tom, 'reminds me also of a novel by, I think, Zane Grey, on somewhat similar lines. Some of the characters were shut up in a valley like this in the Wild West, exactly how, I don't quite remember, and they, too, had to wait until friends happened along to the top of the cliffs and hauled them out with ropes.'

'That's cheerful!' said Hal, with a wry smile. 'It looks as if we'll have to do ditto. Anyhow, we've all just got to put our "thinking caps" on, and try and discover how we may get out.'

They completed the examination of the cliffs up to the châlet, inspecting even the rock above this and over the sheds and pens; but without result.

'Where there's a will, there's generally a way,' growled Hal Spencer, musingly. 'And

I firmly believe that there is no difficulty under the sun that a man can't solve, if he gives his mind to it. I believe that there is a solution to every problem, if you only think hard enough, you chaps.'

'No doubt, old man,' grinned Tom. 'But, except for Dick's suggestion as regards tying long ribbons or strips of cloth to birds' legs, I rather opine the problem of extricating ourselves from this place would prove a hard nut to crack for the cleverest man born. The author of that story, 'The Cliff-Climbers,' Dick told us about, could not think of any other way of getting his characters out of *their* prison valley, or he wouldn't have wound up his yarn so tamely, as you yourself said.'

The three young Englishmen were passing inside the châlet again. Aloys Reding turned his back on them and the rest of the party to cast a casual and semi-despairing look around the valley.

Crack! The deafening report of a rifle, fired immediately behind him, nearly stunned his senses, but not sufficiently to prevent him hearing the 'zip' of the bullet in the same instant as it whistled within an inch of his left ear, fanning that member with its 'wind' —the air it displaced.

He whipped about, considerably startled

and scared, as likewise did the three young Englishmen—to behold Jacques still pointing a smoking rifle full at his head! or so it seemed.

'Assassin!' burst in wild horror and fury from the guide's lips; and he promptly ducked, to avoid the expected second shot, then ran in swiftly under the levelled weapon and grappled the Frenchman for it.

Hal Spencer and the two Howdens stood for the moment petrified with amazement; and Anatole and Jean, the two other Frenchmen, also seemed too surprised to do anything.

But Jacques was equal to the situation.

'Name of a pipe!' he yelled, in well-feigned astonishment. 'What is the matter, Monsieur Reding? What ails you? I shot at a wild rabbit I saw over yonder.' And he nodded his head in the direction he had been pointing the rifle. 'Did you think I shot at you? The silly fellow, gentlemen, actually believes I shot at him. Why should I want to kill you, Monsieur Reding? You owe me a deep apology.'

'The bullet flew within an inch or less of my head,' shouted Aloys indignantly and angrily, and still badly scared. 'I heard it whistle, and even felt the "wind" of it upon my ear. How do I know that you didn't try

to kill me for some vile reason of your own? Even if you did shoot at a rabbit, have you no sense—to shoot so close past a man's head? I might have got the bullet through my skull, had I moved at all.'

He, however, released hold of the other's rifle.

'You saw the rabbit, Jean, didn't you?' Jacques asked of one of his compatriots. 'You saw what I was shooting at?'

'*Oui*! *Mais oui*! (Yes! But yes!), I saw it,' Jean at once replied, nodding his head.

'I wasn't looking,' said Anatole.

'There was no time to warn you, Monsieur Reding. I had to shoot at once. And as it was, I missed,' went on Jacques. Then, with an ingratiating smile, he added: 'I'm sorry if I gave you alla bad scare, but I never stopped to think, gentlemen,' turning and appealing to the three young Englishmen, as they now approached. 'In the circumstances, I can make allowance for what you thought and said, Monsieur the Guide—for jumping to the conclusion that I tried to shoot you. But what motive could I have, gentlemen?'

'None, of course, I should say,' observed Hal Spencer. 'Still, I should advise you to be more careful in future, friend Jacques, when you want to add to our larder. You gave

all our nerves a nasty jar. I fully believed one or other of us must be shot; and, according to Aloys, you fired just past his ear.'

'I sincerely ask his pardon again—all your pardons, gentlemen,' returned Jacques, humbly enough. 'I didn't want to scare any of you, and I thought I might safely shoot past Monsieur Reding. But I *will* be more careful in future when I see something to shoot.'

Aloys said no more, but, giving the man a sharp, resentful glance, threw himself down on the grass; and Dick and Tom seated themselves beside him. Hal went and got a stool, which stood by the châlet door, and bringing it to where they were, sat down upon it in a meditative way.

Jacques, apparently still in some dudgeon, stalked off inside the hut, and Jean and Anatole followed him within, the last-mentioned singing out in French:

'You had better wasn up the breakfast things, you two.'

As soon as the door had shut upon the trio, Aloys said in a low voice:

'Gentlemen, I firmly believe that fellow Jacques tried to murder me just now. I saw no rabbit, although I had my back turned to him and was looking in the direction in which he fired; and when I swung round,

he was pointing his rifle full at my head it seemed.'

'Oh, nonsense, Aloys! Why should he try to murder you?' snapped Hal Spencer, impatiently. 'The three of them are honest fellows enough, I feel sure. It was a gross mistake on your part, I have no doubt; although, of course, he should have been more careful — should not have fired so close past your head. But don't talk now. I want to try and think what else we can do besides adopt Dick's suggestion. You three had also better set your wits sharply to work—give your minds to endeavouring to solve the problem facing us.'

The guide held his peace; but after a minute or two, unobserved by his three companions, who were silently absorbed by the puzzle of how they might extricate themselves from their predicament, he rose and stole noiselessly to the open window of the living room of the châlet. There he remained, crouching under the sill, listening to the conversation of their three hosts inside.

Some more minutes passed. Then suddenly Hal Spencer leaped so excitedly to his feet that he upset his stool.

'I knew there must be some way out of the difficulty,' he cried, startling Aloys Reding,

who came hurriedly running from the châlet. 'The thing's as easy almost as winking—*almost*, though it will take us some days—perhaps a week or more to do it.'

The two Howdens looked at him expectantly, then stared in some surprise at the guide, who looked unduly excited and even alarmed.

'Well, how *do* you propose getting out, Hal?' asked Dick, with a smile.

'How do you think? Try and think now! See if you cannot also solve the difficulty. I've done so, right enough. I've thought of a way by which we can climb the cliffs.'

CHAPTER V

CLIMBING OF THE CLIFFS

'You have?' demanded Dick Howden, incredulously.

'Rats!' rather inelegantly interjected Tom.

'I have, I tell you,' cried Hal, his face alight with the triumph of discovery. 'Who was it, Dick, wrote that story you told us about—"The Plant-Hunters," and "The Cliff-Climbers"?'

'Captain Mayne Reid, a famous author of boys' stories a generation or two back. He lived about the same time as Captain Marryat, I should say, and just before Henty began writing.'

'Never mind all that! I've beaten him at his own game—at least, in power of invention, or ingenuity. I've thought of a way of getting up the cliffs that he didn't. We can get up them almost anywhere—almost *anywhere*, my hearties; but it will mean pretty stiff work for probably a week or more, as I said . . .

'Captain Mayne Reid couldn't have thought of my way, or he certainly would have adopted it in his story,' he continued, with a light laugh. 'I told you that human ingenuity can generally find a way out of any difficulty—that there's a solution to be found to every problem, as a rule. Look round you, now, and see whether you can also rumble the answer.'

Dick and Tom ran their eyes again around the cuplike valley, surveyed the mighty, unbroken, circular wall of unclimbable rock shutting it in, and shook their heads hopelessly.

Aloys Reding seemed bubbling over with eagerness to say something as he ran up, but held his tongue and merely looked back at the châlet.

'I can't see any way of getting out unless you think of lassoing projections of rock one above another, Hal,' said Tom.

'Or trying to dig our way through the blocked-up pass,' growled Dick, 'a job that would be difficult, even if it were possible for us in our position.'

'How could you hope to cast noosed ropes the whole of the way up the face of precipices, nowhere under two hundred feet high, monsieur?' asked Aloys with a dry smile.

'I don't intend to try, any more than to mole my way out through the blocked-up pass,' returned Hal. 'But it was thinking of the blocked-up pass, I'll admit, that put the idea into my head. There are plenty of blind alleys like the pass—little bays or indentations—all round the cliffs, aren't there? There's one, for instance.'

And he pointed to the recess at their back—the one between the châlet and the blocked-up pass—the one we more particularly described.

'Yes, of course,' chorussed his companions.

'That one will do as well as any other—better, indeed, as the cliffs enclosing it are lower than elsewhere; it's handier from the châlet; and it is not too wide—only about fifteen feet from side to side.'

'What are you driving at? What's your idea? Tell us. Don't keep us in suspense,' cried Tom.

'What's to prevent us—what's to prevent us, I ask?' said Hal, slowly and triumphantly, 'making a ladder, putting it against one wall of that recess, cutting a ledge—or rather a small cave—at the top of the ladder, and then putting another ladder on the ledge against the opposite wall, where we would cut a fresh ledge or cavity, of course, for a third ladder?

Do you catch on ? We can zig-zag our way up thus, with ladders, the whole height of the cliffs, within the recess ! '

' Hurray ! Of course we can,' shouted Tom Howden, so that he fetched the three Frenchmen to the door of the châlet to know what was the cause of his excitement.

The three young Englishmen beckoned eagerly to them, and they came slouching forward—without their rifles or any visible arms.

' Gentlemen,' whispered Aloys, quickly, ' cover them with your rifles when they come up. They are escaped convicts, and they have murdered my uncle and my cousin. I overheard them say as much just now, as also that they mean to murder the four of us at the first opportunity.'

' You don't say ! ' gasped Hal, quietly slipping the sling of his rifle from off his shoulder.

' I do. Hold them up, now, with me. Shoot them down without mercy if they attempt to rush back to the châlet ! We must make prisoners of them.'

He promptly pointed his rifle at the startled Frenchmen, menacing all three with a slight movement to and fro of the muzzle.

Hal, Dick, and Tom were quick to follow his example.

'Stand and put up your hands!' shouted Aloys. 'We know who and what you are—what you've done, and what you meditate doing!'

The Frenchmen jumped as if already shot, and made to break back at a run for the châlet.

Aloys at once sent a bullet whizzing over their heads as an instance of his determination. On that, all three unmasked villains shrank within themselves, stood still, and fearfully hoisted their hands above their heads.

'What—what does this mean, gentlemen? What harm have we done?' asked Jacques.

'I overheard you talking just now inside the châlet,' returned Aloys, sternly. 'I crept up and listened at the open window, for I've distrusted you all along. I overheard them gloating over the way they had escaped from gaol in Dijon, gentlemen. They killed a warder to get away. And they as good as said, also, that they had killed my uncle, Franz Ebel, and his son, my cousin Louis, and I distinctly heard them plotting to get rid of us four—murdering us all either in our sleep to-night, or shooting us at the first chance they got.'

'It's a lie,' roared Jacques.

'It's the truth,' retorted Aloys.

'We believe you, Reding,' said Hal Spencer. 'Keep where you are and as you are, you three, or we will show you no mercy. We will shoot you if you move. Tom, go and bring all the arms out of the hut, while we decide what we shall do with the ruffians.'

Tom brought all the arms and ammunition outside the hut; then the escaped convicts were made march before the levelled rifles in at the door, and, in spite of their protests and savage imprecations, were shut inside the inner, or back room, which our friends had used as a bedroom overnight. The communicating door was then firmly secured upon them—first with rope lashing, and then with a hastily constructed barricade, which could be wholly or partially removed easily enough at any time by their captors.

As the only other opening within the bedroom was a window barely a foot square, the fellows seemed safely caged.

'They can hardly break out without our hearing them,' said Hal, 'and one or more of us must always remain on guard, day and night, in case they try to. Now we'll start making our ladders. We'll transfer all the arms, tools, et cetera, to the bay; and you can watch them there, Tom, while your

brother, Aloys, and I, cut down suitable trees and lug them to the recess.'

'Yes, let us lose no time in making a start with our cliff-climbing,' concurred Dick.

Four spruce firs, each about forty feet in height, were selected within the nearest grove, and were promptly felled by the vigorous application of axes. Then the weak parts of the tops were cut off, and the sides of two ladders of thirty or more feet were ready.

As they had found a big bag of nails in the châlet with the other tools—hammers, axes, picks, and shovels—they had no difficulty in making rungs by nailing strips of wood or faggots upon two of the felled trees. The thicker ends of these were trimmed thinner with axes to make them lighter.

Amid a general cheer, the first ladder was then reared against one of the towering walls of the recess; and, while Aloys and Tom secured its foot firmly by heaping boulders around it, Hal and Dick ascended it with a pickaxe each, and proceeded to hew out a cavity in the solid rock on either side of its top.

As Hal and Dick speedily found it difficult to work side by side, they took it in turn to excavate.

'We must make a cave at the top of each

ladder large enough to hold two of us at least,' Hal had said, ' for two of us will always require to be aloft to hoist up the ladders.'

A fairly large cavity had been cut in the rock-face when Hal and Dick were startled by loud shouts of alarm from Aloys and Tom, below.

Looking down, they saw the three Frenchmen in the mouth of the ravine, struggling with their companions for possession of the firearms and ammunition !

' Quick, Hal—Dick ! help ! help ! ' Tom bawled breathlessly.

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLE IN THE RECESS

HAL SPENCER was below Dick Howden on the ladder. It was Dick's turn to wield the pick, and Hal was shovelling away the debris as it fell in the cavity.

They had a long, stout rope dangling to the ground from the topmost rung, in order to haul up any fresh tool or anything else they needed.

Without a second's hesitation, Hal dropped his shovel in the cavity, swung round to the back, or underside, of the ladder, and gripped the rope with both hands. Coiling his legs about it, he shot earthwards like greased lightning.

The rope scorched his hands at the speed he went, but he did not lose hold of it, and he had the good sense to tighten his grip and stay his swift career near the bottom.

Then he slid down more easily, and dropping without the slightest shock upon the hard

rock, rushed, with a ringing shout, to the help of Tom, who was battling with Jean.

Both contestants had hold of a rifle, and were trying to tear it away from each other. The Frenchman had also a bandolier of cartridges dangling from his hands.

Seeing big, strong Hal making for them, Jean leaped smartly backward, dragging Tom to his knees. Then, with a quick, semicircular twirl of the rifle, the Frenchman succeeded in wresting it from his youthful opponent, and, wheeling instantly, dashed at top speed out of the recess.

Hal did not make after him, but promptly changing his course, ran to the aid of Aloys, who was contending with both Jacques and Anatole. The Swiss was hanging on like grim death to both rifles his antagonists had snatched up, and was dancing agilely about, dodging the kicks they were only able to aim at him, with their hands full.

The pair were in each other's way, and as likely to kick each other as him. They were impeded also by the bandoliers they had grabbed.

Out of the corner of his eye, as he turned aside, Hal glimpsed Dick Howden in the act of dropping from the rope. Dick had followed him with equal precipitation and good fortune.

At sight of Hal rushing towards them, Jacques, with a bull-like bellow, darted in on Aloys, throwing the Swiss backward and off his feet. Anatole wrenched his rifle free; and in the same instant, Jacques liberated his. Both convicts, spinning on their heels at once, sprang away out of the recess in Jean's wake.

'After them! The rifles they've got are unloaded,' panted Aloys.

Hal and Dick raced in pursuit, and would probably have overtaken Jacques and Anatole. But as they rushed round the corner of the bay, they saw Jean standing facing them, about half-way to the châlet. The fellow had turned about in his flight, and was hurriedly stuffing a clip of cartridges into the magazine of his rifle.

'Back, Dick, quick! Back inside the ravine!' Hal gasped. 'We must get our rifles and hold it.'

The two young men, whipping about, ran their hardest back towards the bay. They sprang inside its jaws not a moment too soon.

Crack! rang out Jean's rifle even as they did so, waking numerous echoes from the cliffs around, and the bullet smacked against the farther rocky jaw.

Tom and Aloys had waited to secure their

own rifles, which were fully loaded. They now fearlessly showed themselves in the mouth of the ravine, and let drive simultaneously a shot apiece at the marksman. But, flurried as they were after their tussle, their shots flew wide, and he immediately turned and bolted for the châlet.

Jacques and Anatole jumped from side to side as they ran after him, thus presenting very indifferent targets ; and, although Aloys and Tom also sent a couple of shots apiece after them, they reached the door of the châlet unscathed like Jean, sprang after him, and slammed the door shut.

' They've bested us properly,' groaned Hal, who, with Dick, had now got a loaded rifle and joined the other two in the mouth of the recess. ' They're impregnable inside the châlet with the arms they've secured, and they've got us penned up inside here.'

' And they've all the provisions, while we've none—not even a drink of water, and I'm terribly thirsty,' added Dick Howden. ' Cutting that cavity was hard and thirsty work.'

' We are stronger in number than they are, anyhow,' said Tom, ' and we are safe enough inside here. We can easily fortify the mouth of the bay with these boulders. They'll not dare to come against us in daylight, any more

than we can venture to attack them where they are.'

'One or two of us can slip out when it's dark and get in water and a sheep or so, so we needn't starve or go thirsty after to-night,' observed the guide.

'But there are a good many hours to night-fall yet,' sighed Dick, 'and I'm thirsty already. I suppose you are the same, Hal, after our excavating work?'

Hal did not answer, but proceeded to trundle a big boulder from its bed to the jaw of the ravine. The others followed suit, and in a very short time they had built up a strong barricade of the loose rocks right across the mouth of the little bay.

They left chinks between the boulders for loopholes to fire through, and then lay down behind the barricade with their rifles beside them to decide on what should be their best course of action, with the decidedly awkward turn circumstances had taken.

It was not yet noon, but, having breakfasted so early, they were all feeling peckish, and, as it was a hot day, water was also a great desideratum with them all.

'Well, it's no good lying idle and nursing our pangs,' said Hal, at length. 'We may as well be getting on with our cliff-scaling.

We can't get out of here until nightfall, Jacques and the other two could pick us off with ease from the châlet, and so we've got to make up our minds to wait until then to satisfy the inner man. The harder we work, the more quickly the time will pass. Thank goodness neither of you two, Tom and Aloys, are hurt in any way. Those ruffians might have done you both serious injuries before Dick and I could get down to your help.'

'It is surprising you both got down as quickly as you did, gentlemen,' smiled the guide. 'I suppose the convicts forced out a log in the wall on the far side of the châlet. They must then have crept along the foot of the cliff; for the first thing I knew about it was hearing Monsieur Tom call out and seeing him jump up. And when I looked round, there were the three villians picking up a bandolier and rifle each.'

'You and I, Aloys, had better finish making the cave, or niche,' said Tom, 'while you two take a rest, Hal and Dick.'

'I'll be nailing on the rungs of our second ladder,' returned his brother; 'I'd sooner be doing something. We can take it in turn, Hal, to keep an eye on the châlet.'

'Right-o! I'll take first watch,' said Hal. 'The fellows will hear us at work, and may be

tempted to try another rush. Pity help one or more of them if they do ! I'll shoot the first man I see. It's evidently our lives or theirs from this on, and it's not going to be ours if I can help it.'

Aloys and Tom, therefore, went up the ladder and finished the first cavity between them, while Hal and Dick completed the second ladder, and relieved each other on watch at the barricade. But the convicts did not dare to show themselves outside the châlet, and the day wore slowly on, our four friends in the little bay tightening their belts to alleviate the gnawings of their hunger, and putting pebbles in their mouths to relieve their thirst.

' If we only had a spring in here ! ' groaned Dick, who suffered most.

CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT NAPPING

THE cavity at the top of the ladder was made about six feet high, the same in width, and four feet deep at its base. Then the second ladder was hauled up and safely reared against the opposite wall of rock by three of them. Its foot was tightly wedged against the back of the cave with loose rock, so that it might not shift.

Hal then mounted it cautiously, lest it should slide aside with him, while Dick and Tom held it tightly in the cavity, and Aloys lay behind the barricade below, ready to fire on the convicts if they appeared.

Hal was equipped with a hammer and one of several strong staples they had found in the châlet. On reaching the top rung, he hammered the two points of the staple into the rock-face, and securely tied the rung to it, thus fixing the ladder firmly. He then drew up a pickaxe and attacked the rock above,

hewing out a fresh cave, while Tom went down the ladder and joined Aloys.

Almost immediately the convicts began firing at the southern jaw of the recess, which projected more than the one nearer the châlet. The bullets, being shot at an angle, were deflected and rebounded up the recess, narrowly missing Aloys and Tom's heads, or bodies. For, as the shots were aimed at the sharp-shooters' own heights from the ground, they passed over the little barricade of boulders.

Aloys and Tom, however, dropped behind the barricade, where they remained crouching, with their own rifles thrust through the chinks, lest the foe should follow up the fusillade by another dash to get in.

With the glancing and rebounding bullets flying at various radii back across the mouth of the little bay, and up this, the pair on guard would have run grave risk of being hit had they as much as raised their heads above the boulders. As it was, the leaden messengers whizzed over them at all angles. But, keeping their heads well under the cover, and working in desperate haste, they increased the height of the barricade by adding to it what other loose rocks lay within easy reach of them.

'Keep well down—keep your heads low,

you two,' Hal called down to them from his ladder. ' Let them keep on firing. If they're such fools as to use up all their ammunition, we'll have them at our mercy. Reserve your fire until they show themselves.'

' We're all right,' laughed Tom. ' And, trust us, we'll give a good account of them if they come against us again.'

The convicts presently ceased trying to hit those on watch, and aimed at about the height they calculated the two at work on the ladders would be. But, as a rule, they fired either too high or too low even to inconvenience our friends, who went on plying pick or shovel, as the case might be, undauntedly—quite undeterred by the deadly missiles whizzing above or below them.

Furthermore, as Hal and Dick were working out the second cave on the *southern* side of the recess, the bullets all glanced well behind them. And, as it happened, neither of the ladders were even struck. Before Dick relieved Hal at the excavating, the enemy stopped firing, realizing the fruitlessness and folly of it. When Dick, in *his* turn, was tired with wielding the pick, he and Hal descended to the ground, and Aloys and Tom went up and carried on the work.

Before night's shadows began to fill the bay

and the valley outside, they had their second cave or niche sufficiently large for their purpose. Hal now suggested that they should make use of their first ladder in place of a third on the morrow, if they were unable to construct another one on account of the convicts.

'We'd need a knotted rope then, or a rope ladder, to get down quickly by,' said Dick, shaking his head dubiously, 'if the convicts attempted a rush. I think we had better stick to our original intention of having a fresh ladder for every stage. One of us can easily hold the barricade while the other three go out, at night, and fell and get in trees as we want them.'

This was considered the better plan, and so the quartet, unable to do anything more for the time being, stretched themselves on the hard rock behind their boulder-barricade to wait until it was quite dark; when it was decided that Tom should remain behind on guard and the others should creep forth with rifles and axes and try and cut down and bring in more trees.

'We'll have to do without tea and supper to-night by the look of it,' remarked Hal. 'But we needn't go breakfastless; we can bring in a sheep, or a couple of fowl, when we go out.'

'And who knows but we may be able to turn the tables and overpower the convicts, in some way, before daylight,' said Dick, hopefully.

'Yes,' said Tom. 'They may venture to come out of their den when they hear you fellows chopping down the trees, to try and stop you or rush me.'

'One of us three had better lie on the ground between here and the nearest grove, so as to be handy to help you, Monsieur Tom, in case they attempt anything,' said Aloys. 'Two of us will suffice to do the felling of the trees.'

'By the way, Dick,' Hal then observed, 'how did the heroes of that story you told us about, "The Plant-Hunters," or "Cliff-Climbers," get into the valley that *they* couldn't get out of? And had they any human foes to contend with, like these three murderous scoundrels that we have?'

Dick cleared his throat.

'The scene of the story was laid in the Himalaya Mountains, in India, as I told you, up among the ice and snow, and the two lads, and their Hindoo guide, chased a deer up a glacier, which lay along a deep mountain gorge—just like our blocked-up pass here into a cup-shaped valley like this. When they found that they couldn't get out of the

valley any other way than by the glacier, they made to return that way, only to discover that the glacier had broken its back, so to speak. It had parted in two or more places, right across from one side of the gorge to the other—in wide and very deep crevasses—the lower parts, of course, slipping away down the pass or gorge. They managed to bridge over the first crevasse, or chasm, in the glacier, in a very clever way—too clever, too much of an engineering feat, for me to attempt to tell you how. But they couldn't get across a second, much wider crevasse.'

'I see,' said Hal. 'So that's how they got shut up. They couldn't clamber along either side of the gorge, either, and so pass the crevasse, or yet mount the cliffs there? They had to go back to the valley?'

'That's so. But as to your second question, old man, they had no human foes to deal with, like we have. They had no end of thrilling adventures, though, with wild animals and in other ways.'

'Tell us some of them. It will pass the time,' said Tom.

'Well, for one thing, in pursuit of a bear, they got lost in a labyrinth of winding caves—*lost in total darkness*. But they managed to make candles by melting the fat of the bear

which they had killed, using a metal powder-box, or something of that kind, to melt it in over a fire of the stocks of their guns, and the barrels of their guns as moulds.'

'A proper Robinson Crusoe yarn!' laughed Tom.

'Then, when they got out of the maze of caverns by means of their candles, or before that—I wouldn't be sure which—they had to fight a pack of wild dogs that were shut up in the valley with them, and finally were much terrorized by a "rogue" elephant.'

'What's a "rogue" elephant, Tom?'

'Dunno! Explain.'

'An elephant none of the others in a herd will associate with on account of its ill-temper, and which has to lead a lonely existence, therefore. This brute nearly did the three of them in—had them all "treed," or cornered; but it got into a quicksand in just such a little lake as we have outside, and was slowly swallowed up before their eyes—all but the tip of its trunk, which remained above water until the Hindoo waded in, risking also being caught in the quicksand, and severed it with one slash of his trusty snickersnee.'

'The mean man!' said Hal, in mock reproval.

'But perhaps, Monsieur, he did that to

put the beast out of its misery,' said Aloys, rather naively.

'I've read several of Mayne Reid's books, observed Tom, 'but not that one. I'd like to read it some time. I've read his *Scalp-Hunters*, which is considered his best, and *The Wood-Rangers*, *The Boy Tar*, and I forget the others.'

Crack! crack! crack! Three swift jets of flame spat, one above another, over the extreme left, or southern end, of their barricade—from the jaw of the recess farther from the châlet, and as many bullets whizzed within an ace of Hal's, Dick's, and Aloys' heads. The ears of all four young men were deafened by the close discharge of the unexpected volley.

CHAPTER VIII

FORTIFYING THE RECESS

ALTHOUGH taken wholly by surprise, and in despite, too, of their exceedingly narrow shaves from death, Hal, Dick, and the guide had the great presence of mind, or instinct, to roll quickly aside. Then, scrambling smartly to their knees, the three jerked up their rifles and fired—more or less from their hips—at random, in the direction the murderous volley had come.

Tom Howden did not fire, being more taken aback or less prompt than the others, who, immediately on delivering their random reply-volley, leaped with one accord over the middle of their barricade, which was no longer of any use—at such close quarters. Tom was after them in a flash; and the four young men found themselves confronting their three would-be slayers—between these and the châlet.

All three convicts, concluding rightly that

our friends would not dare to attack the châlet even under cover of darkness, but would be bound to try and get in some food and water, had quietly evacuated the hut just at dusk, through the hole they had made in its farther wall. They had crept some little distance northward, along the base of the cliffs, away from the recess, then circled round through the trees, and come up on the left-hand, or southern side of the bay, where, as they knew, their appearance would not be expected.

Had they only been content to wait, they might have shot our friends down with ease as these issued from the bay. But on stealing up to its jaw, and seeing their intended victims practically in their power, they had not been able to restrain their murderously-inclined natures.

Firing a hasty volley, they had then made to storm over the barricade and fall on them with their rifles clubbed. But they were not quick enough in carrying out their second mode of attack. They waited to club their pieces, and then, disconcerted at not having shot down one of their intended victims, lost heart, and hesitated to spring on to the barricade. None of them cared to lead the onslaught, in the circumstances.

On the other hand, Hal, Dick, Aloys, and

even Tom, all acted more swiftly; and the random return-volley the first three defenders fired, scared the ruffians, who only just escaped being shot down in a body. Cowering, all three convicts at once turned and ran for their lives back the way they had come, or rather in a south-westerly direction—out across the valley—instead of towards the châlet.

Tom at once fired after them, expediting their movements, and Dick and Aloys quickly followed suit. But Hal, without a word, whipped about and ran his hardest towards the châlet.

'Follow me, Tom!' he shouted. 'We'll seize the hut. Dick and Aloys, get back inside the bay, and hold it!'

Tom cut after Hal, and the other two, scrambling back over the barricade, lay snug behind it, congratulating each other with merry laughs over their narrow escape, and at having so completely and unexpectedly turned the tables on their murderous foes.

Hal had in his belt the axe with which he had intended to cut down more trees for ladders, and, on gaining the châlet, he, with one lusty blow of it, smashed in the crazy door. Then he turned, and waited for Tom to join him.

'Hurrah, Tom, my hearty!' he shouted.

'We've turned the tables properly on our friends the enemy. We've got possession of the châlet, with all the food and other necessaries it contains. You or I will take back some food and water at once to Dick and Aloys; and then we two will hold the hut, while we arrange a fresh plan of campaign.'

The two in the hut quickly thrust some butter, bread, cheese, cold ham, mutton, and a bottle of wine, into a bag, Carrying this, Tom ran back to the bay, while Hal followed him half-way, then stood on guard with rifle at the ready, peering all about in search of their foes.

But the convicts did not show up again that night, realizing that they had made a very false move and were thoroughly checkmated. Hal himself then carried to the recess a basketful more of provisions, including bacon and coffee, and some bottles of water for breakfast, as well as a frying-pan and a kettle. With faggots and matches, the two holding the bay could easily make a camp-fire and have a hot meal in the morning, therefore.

On a third journey that he made, Hal took with him blankets and other bedding, as well as a canvas tent for Dick and Aloys to sleep under, by turns. He and Tom then had a good meal themselves in the châlet, and took

it in turn to watch and sleep, turn and turn about, during the night, which passed uneventfully, without a further alarm in any shape or form.

In the grey of the early morning, Dick and Aloys both came across to the châlet, unfired upon by the convicts ; and it was decided to pull down the hut, transfer all its contents within the bay, and make use of its timber to build a high stockade across the mouth of this so that they might work safely inside there.

'By pulling down the hut and also some of the pens for the cattle, we will get more nails for our ladders,' said Hal. 'We haven't enough as it is to make the ten or twelve ladders we shall need to climb the cliffs, and I feared we should be driven to boring holes for our rungs with a red-hot poker, or something of that kind.'

It was broad daylight by the time they had got all the furniture of the châlet transported to the bay. Then they started to demolish the hut, keeping its various parts as intact as they could, to save trouble and time in putting up their stockade.

They were so engaged, when *crack-crack-crack* ! three shots were fired at them from a grove of trees some little way off, but almost opposite the châlet. The bullets embedded

themselves harmlessly in the log-walls still standing.

Hurriedly taking cover, Hal and Tom, who were within, promptly returned the fusillade ; and suddenly a rifle cracked from another grove nearer to the bay. It was answered by a howl of pain from one of the convicts, and startled oaths from his companions.

Dick and Aloys were posted in the second grove, in case of such an attack. They had wisely held their fire until one of the convicts—Jacques—unsuspectingly exposed himself to their cross-fire ; when Dick, promptly shooting, hit him in the left leg.

It was only a graze, but it smarted cruelly ; and the discovery that they were outflanked was quite enough for the cowardly trio. With all haste, they evacuated their position, and fled away through the bushes and trees towards the farther side of the valley, Jacques limping painfully as he went.

Our four cliff-climbers were left undisturbed the rest of the morning ; and, in the afternoon, after a hearty dinner, with one of their number posted on guard in the nearest grove, the three others, working hard, put up a loopholed stockade, eight feet high, across the mouth of the recess, outside the barricade of boulders.

That done, Hal, Dick, and Aloys sallied forth, armed to the teeth and carrying axes, to fell more trees. Tom, of course, remained within the stockade—in which a door on hinges had been put, needless, perhaps, to say—to guard the recess if necessary ; and one of the three others kept vigilant watch all round, while the trees were being chopped down, in the grove immediately opposite the bay.

Without seeing anything of the convicts, quite unmolested by these, Hal, Dick, and Aloys, taking it in turn to ply their axes and stand guard, cut down eight spruce fir-trees, to make four more ladders, and then started to drag them towards the stockade-door. Tom came out of this, to lend his aid. Of course, they had taken ropes with them for the purpose.

Barely were they half-way to the recess with the first tree trunk, when three rifle-reports rang out simultaneously, blending in one, like a volley, and then, sharp, came a second, more disorderly, straggling volley. The bullets, however, were all aimed too high and flew harmlessly over the heads of the quartet, who at once dropped behind the tree trunk, each wherever he stood, and cautiously reconnoitred over it.

Three or more little clouds of smoke were seen by them curling away before the light breeze in front of a large grove beyond the lake—on its south-west side and more particularly facing the recess than the grove from which they had brought the tree.

This consequently, lying parallel with the line of fire, afforded next to no cover ; and so Hal and Tom, who were on its southern side, at once jumped up, and with a stride or two, put the nearest grove between them and their foes, then raced back towards it. Aloys and Dick, still closely hugging the other side of the tree-trunk, just as quickly returned the enemies' fire, shooting below the tell-tale puffs of smoke.

Seeing that they were likely to be outflanked by Hal and Tom, who were now hidden from them, and also not relishing the close shooting of the other two, the convicts again very pusillanimously forsook their ambush, and were seen scuttling away quickly back through their grove.

They did not fire again, but lay low, whereever they had sought refuge ; and Hal remained within the grove opposite the recess, while his three comrades went on dragging the felled tree and got it safely through the stockade gate.

In like manner the seven other tree-trunks were safely taken within the recess, Hal covering the operation the whole time. Then he rejoined the others, and all four young men withdrew into their stronghold. They made fast the gate and sat down to a jolly tea with well-whetted appetites, one or the other of them peeping forth ever and anon, through a loophole, to make sure that their foes were not creeping upon them again.

'Well, we've beaten them off once more,' laughed Tom. 'Perhaps now they'll leave us in peace.'

'They'll only leave us in peace for a time, you may rest assured, Monsieur,' said Aloys.

CHAPTER IX

FOUR LADDERS UP

'I DON'T suppose Jacques and Co. will attempt anything against us to-night,' said Hal. 'Jacques himself will hardly be inclined to do so with his wounded leg. But it won't do to relax our vigilance. I propose that you and Aloys, Dick, take the first watch of, say, four hours, and then Tom and I the second watch until daylight.'

'Yes, it will be best for two of us to be on watch together,' said Aloys

'And decidedly less lonely,' agreed Dick. 'I might have settled that fellow Jacques for good and all, for he fully exposed himself, not knowing Aloys and I were ambushed in the adjoining grove. But, of course, I did not want to kill him, and so shot at his legs. I don't think I more than just nicked him.'

'I am afraid it will be their lives or ours before we are finished,' said Tom, dismally.

It was too late to put up another ladder

that evening, so they spent what little remained of the daylight in erecting a tiny lean-to hut, in which the two off-duty might sleep, at the extreme back of the recess. And then, to save time next morning, they lit lamps and lanterns when the darkness fell, and constructed their third ladder, so that it would be ready to hoist up and fit into place.

Hal and Tom then retired to the hut at the back of the bay, and went to bed, and Dick and Aloys seated themselves on stools, with their rifles between their legs, behind a second little barricade of timber and boulders, which they had erected a few yards within the stockade, and parallel with it.

Their heads barely rose above this second barrier, which would shelter them if the outer stockade were rushed. From time to time, however, one or the other, or both of them, rose and, passing through into the space between, looked out through the loopholes in the stockade, to reconnoitre in case the convicts were trying to steal another march upon them.

The night passed tranquilly. None of their three enemies reappeared. Dick called Hal and Tom when the first four hours were up, and then went and lay down in the hut with the guide.

Towards daybreak, Tom watched alone, while Hal dozed behind the second barricade, and the two in the hut were allowed to sleep on for another couple of hours, it being decided that Tom should make up for his lesser rest later, while the three others were working.

Nevertheless, all four were astir fairly early. Tom had prepared breakfast for them all and, when they had partaken of it, and washed in some buckets of water—filled from a large rain-barrel that they had brought from the châlet—the third ladder was hoisted up and placed in the second cavity, with its top resting against the cliff opposite. Hal, as before, then warily mounted it, and fixed it firmly to the rock-face by means of a staple, to which he bound it with rope.

As the precipice at this point inclined slightly backward, instead of projecting or rising vertically, it was not necessary to cut so high a niche, or cavity, for standing-room for the next ladder. Hal and Dick relieved each other at this work. Aloys busied himself below, alternately by watching out for the convicts and by making rungs of equal length for the fourth ladder. Tom retired to the hut to obtain the two or three more hours' rest he needed.

The third cavity being soon hewn out, the

fourth ladder was hastily completed and got up. The cliff face, where its top rested, bulged forward somewhat, so the next cavity would require to be even deeper and higher than the first two in order to permit of standing-room. On the other hand, however, as both opposing cliffs converged and were nearer each other, the ladder stood at a steeper angle, and some seven or eight feet in height were gained by that fact.

Tom was still allowed to slumber on ; for, owing to the laddering being just behind a slight narrowing of the bay, our friends were safe from being sniped at while aloft, except from directly in front of the stockade—and that only when they were midway on a ladder.

All three took their rifles up with them, so that they could fire down from the cavities if necessary. And, naturally, they kept their eyes roving out over the valley when ascending or descending the ladders, or standing idle in a niche.

Moreover, after the fourth ladder was up, Dick lost no time in taking Aloys' place as sentry at the stockade.

The guide started cutting the fourth niche in the rock-face. And when Tom appeared, he helped in the work, relieving Hal, who

joined Dick on the ground in constructing a fifth ladder.

When the fourth niche was sufficiently high and deep for their purpose, a halt was called for dinner, after which, while Tom kept watch, the fifth ladder was got up.

Just as it had been put in position, and Hal, as usual, was mounting it to fix it against the rock, there was the reverberant ' crack ' of a rifle out in the valley, from the direction of the grove facing the bay—the same grove from which the cliff-climbers had cut the trees for their ladders.

A bullet whizzed a few feet below Hal and the ladder, passing harmlessly up the bay, to flatten itself against the rocky cliff terminating this.

Immediately afterwards came two more rifle reports, and ' zip ! zip ! ' another bullet passed close under him, and a third over his head.

Undaunted, he ran on up the ladder, and, shielded by the protrusive rock where the recess narrowed between him and its mouth, proceeded unconcernedly to hammer in his staple.

Tom at once returned the enemy's fire through a loophole in the stockade, Aloys hurrying to do likewise. Dick, sheltered

within the fourth niche, continued to hold the ladder steady, watching out at the same time that the convicts did not try to rush the stockade or work round to the side, and so uncover Hal.

Jacques and Co., however, were not inclined to attempt either manœuvre in the face of Tom's and Aloys' fire from the loopholes. Keeping well under cover, the dastardly trio only shot again as Hal came down the ladder, after fastening it in position.

All their shots again went wide, and Hal was in no way perturbed. He descended even leisurely, to show his contempt for the enemy, although Dick begged of him to hurry.

'Don't you think we had better sally out, all four of us, and drive them off?' said Dick, when Hal stood beside him once more in the fourth niche. 'It's too risky, old man, mounting and descending the ladder with those ruffians sniping all the time like that at you. One of them might pick you off, you know.'

'Perhaps it would be as well to drive them off,' agreed Hal. 'In any case, we've only got lengths for another ladder, and we shall have to get in more trees. So we may as well go now and procure them, as later.'

Accordingly, the two hurried down the fourth ladder, Jacques and Co. promptly

'potshotting' again at them. But they moved so smartly, and the convicts were such indifferent marksmen, that neither of them had the slightest hesitation in running down the three other ladders.

A triumphant cheer came floating from the grove as their heads disappeared below the stockade.

'Oh, you think you've compelled us to abandon our operations, do you, you rascals?' observed Hal Spencer. 'We'll soon convince you of your error.'

The four cliff-climbers consulted together for a few minutes. Then the gate, or door, in the stockade was silently unfastened, and Hal sprang out, loaded rifle in hand.

Rushing forward a few yards, he flung himself prone, and hurriedly sent a shot winging into the grove. He was up again in a moment and running swiftly forward towards the grove once more, with his three companions racing behind him.

CHAPTER X

THE STOCKADE ON FIRE

All four cliff-climbers only ran a few yards at a time, jumping from side to side also, for the most part, as they did so. Then they sprawled prone on the ground, and sent a shot or two apiece into the grove, immediately afterwards bounding to their feet and dashing forward once more.

Only a single shot was fired by each of the three convicts, and that was on the quartet's first appearance outside the stockade. Scared by the bold and determined dash, the ruffians, promptly evacuating their ambush, fled back through the timber across the valley, never waiting to fire another shot even in their retreat, so precipitate was their flight.

With a ringing hurrrah, which woke repeated echoes from the cliffs around, Hal gained the grove of spruce firs, his three companions being quickly beside him.

Hurrying through the entangling growth,

they saw their foes running hard across an open space for a more distant grove of trees, towards the middle of the valley.

'Let them go,' panted Hal. 'Don't waste any more shots. We'll cut down enough trees to make six more ladders, which I think will be sufficient to scale the cliffs, and then I think the best thing we can do is to set fire to what is left of this grove—what do you say, Aloys?—so that the scoundrels will not be able to use it again to snipe at us when we're on the ladders.'

'I think it will be the best thing to do, monsieur,' replied the guide.

They had brought axes in their belts, and so the rest of the afternoon was spent in felling a dozen more of the spruce firs, sufficiently long and slender for their purpose. Two of them, standing on guard at some little distance from the grove, watched every approach lest the convicts should again attempt to interfere with them, while the other two plied their axes with might and main.

The convicts did not show up again, but probably watched their operations from a safe distance.

When a dozen of the firs had been felled, Aloys Reding remained in the grove, while the three young Englishmen dragged tree after tree to the stockade, and laid them side by

side against one wall of the bay. Still Jacques and Co. made no move, evidently afraid of coming to a pitched battle even with Aloys alone, entrenched as he was.

Then, in four different places, the undergrowth in the grove was set on fire, and, as there had been a long drought, it blazed up like tinder. Some of the trees quickly caught, and the entire grove was speedily a roaring, raging furnace of flame, sending up a mighty volume of smoke into the sky. The heat was so intense that our four friends had very shortly to beat a retreat from the spot.

'There is no likelihood of the fire spreading to any of the other groves,' said Hal. 'The sheep and cattle have cropped the grass all round too short for that.'

'And the smoke may be seen by some of the search parties who must be looking for us,' said Tom, 'and bring them to the valley.'

But Aloys did not hold out much hope of such a result, as they were so far removed from the usual Alpine tracks.

'We had better get in a sheep, too, while we are here,' said Dick. 'Our fresh meat is running short, and there's no saying how long we may be kept shut up in the valley. Or a couple of fowl might do. We might also see if there are any eggs in the fowl-house.'

'A good idea,' said Hal.

So leaving Aloys and Tom inside the stockade to hold the bay, he and Dick went to the fowl-houses. They found half a dozen eggs which had been laid that morning. Evidently the convicts had secured what had been previously laid.

They were also able to shoot a couple of wild rabbits which they saw, and they wrung the necks of two cockerels they captured. Furthermore, they drove back before them to the stockade, a couple of sheep—deciding to keep the animals alive unless needed for food—and a goat for the sake of its milk. They, moreover, refilled an empty keg with fresh water at one of the springs which fed the lake.

Very little work, therefore, could be done the rest of that day as regarded cutting the fifth niche, which was situated about a hundred and ten feet up the face of the rock—on the cliff-wall they had first started to climb, or excavate. Thus, as they exultantly saw, and told one another, they were about half-way up the precipices shutting them in.

The sheep and goat were tied to the hut at the back of the bay, and provided with enough grass and water to satisfy them. Nevertheless, they kept up an incessant bleating.

With the fall of night, Hal and Tom took

the first watch, and the other two at once retired to sleep, so that they might be at work again at their cliff-climbing first thing in the morning. Nothing happened until well into the second watch, about three o'clock in the morning, when Aloys and Dick were on guard.

Then suddenly, without the pair having heard a sound—or seen anything a few minutes before, when they had looked out—a bright glare illuminated the darkness just outside the stockade, at one side of it, and they heard the crackle of burning brushwood!

Immediately afterwards, a second glare shot up beside the other jaw of the bay, also on the exterior of the stockade, and the loud crackling of fiercely-burning brushwood came from there also.

Dick and Aloys sprang to their feet, and, shouting to awaken their sleeping companions, rushed to loopholes. They were in time to see two of the convicts—Jean and Anatole—running away to right and left, respectively, along the line of cliffs on either hand. Their forms, armed with rifles, were shown up plainly for a moment by the illumination.

The next they had vanished into the shadows beyond its range, and an exultant shout went up from the middle distance in Jacques' voice, which they echoed with equally jubilant yells.

The two cunning scoundrels had crept, like Red Indians or snakes, through the long grass along either cliff-wall to the right and left of the bay, each with a load of dry brushwood, which they had then lighted simultaneously against the stockade.

Dick, who was nearest the door, or gate, immediately unbarred it and threw it open, and he and Aloys rushed out to scatter the burning piles. But they could only use their rifle-barrels and their feet. And the instant they appeared outside the stockade, ' crack ! ' rang out a rifle from near-by, and a bullet whistled within an ace of the guide's head, to thud into the stockade.

' Get back inside the door ! Quick, monsieur ! They can pick us off easily in the light,' cried Aloys.

And he was back through the door in a flash, even as there came two more rifle reports, from left and right, respectively, and two more bullets thudded into the stockade on either side of Dick.

He followed the guide within again, hot-foot, then ran and picked up one of the long, slender branches they had cut off the tops of the fir trees and meant to make into rungs. Thrusting it out through the open door, without exposing himself, he tried to push

the burning brushwood at one side away from the stockade. But this had already caught at the spot, the timber being tarred and dry and so highly inflammable.

Aloys rushed and caught up their barrel of water. He dashed half the contents against the inside of the stockade on the other side of the bay, just as Hal and Tom came racing up. They had only waited to grab their rifles, on being aroused by their companion's shouts.

'The convicts have set the stockade on fire, Hal,' cried Dick. 'We must either let it burn or fight the flames outside as well as in, and the ruffians fired on Aloys and me when we went out just now.'

'Come on! Follow me—or remain behind just as you like, if you don't care about risking being shot. I'm going out. We can't hope to save the stockade from this side. We must fight the fire on the outer.'

And Hal, rifle in one hand, axe in the other, plunged out through the doorway.

Dick was after Hal like a shot. The mere hint of his being too careful of his own safety to follow was enough to make him do so.

Shots were fired at them both as they rushed forth, but the dense smoke, rolling and eddying about them like a moving fog, screened them in great measure from the eyes of their

three foes, and their activity also militated against their being picked off.

Each flew to opposite ends of the stockade and began scattering the burning brushwood. But in both places the stockade itself was now well alight and burning furiously, the flames running swiftly up it and leaping and licking high above it.

'In on them! Rush them, Jean—Jacques,' Anatole yelled in French.

'Yes, now's our chance. Close in!' shouted Jean.

'No, no! The two inside will shoot you down!' roared Jacques.

And the trio kept back.

CHAPTER XI

A TRUCE

'BACK inside again, Dick! We can do nothing more out here,' bawled Hal, to make himself heard above the roar of the flames. 'We must hew down the burning logs from within, to save what we can of the stockade.'

They both ran back inside the gateway, and were only through it in the nick of time. Three rifle shots rang out the second after, and in through the aperture, hard on their heels, whizzed three bullets, to strike harmlessly against the rocky walls of the bay.

All three convicts had come up just beyond the radius of the light cast by the blazing logs, and fired at them a trifle too late.

Tom was watching out, however, anxious for their safety, the while helping Aloys Reding as best he could to fight the flames on the inside.

He at once let drive two shots, in quick succession, from his rifle through one of the

middle loopholes, in the direction of two of the flashes of their besiegers' pieces. And Jacques and Co. hurriedly retired to a more respectful distance again.

Then he remained on guard beside the loophole, in spite of the choking and blinding smoke, as well as the heat of the flames, while his brother and Hal attacked either blazing end of the stockade.

With desperate and hefty strokes of their axes, Hal and Dick smashed out the logs that were on fire, Aloys helping by beating out, with a wet, empty sack, the flames that were spreading to the middle part of the wooden wall.

Jacques and Co. fired shots again and again at the breaches thus made; but the dense smoke hid Hal and Dick from their gaze, and the ruffians could only shoot at random.

With their eyes smarting and watering, coughing and nearly suffocated, the besieged at last fell back from the stockade up the bay, and gratefully gulped in mouthfuls of fresh air while they wiped their perspiring brows and sank down to rest behind boulders.

But they had not fallen back before their work of salvage was complete. The middle part of the stockade stood intact, only slightly charred and scorched in places, and in the gap

at either end of it lay a heap of smouldering, blackened, half-consumed logs.

'We'll barricade the gaps with these tree trunks as soon as we are sufficiently rested,' panted Hal. 'Then we'll be fairly secure again. From this on we shall have to keep a sharper look-out; that's plain.'

The convicts maintained a dropping fire on the gaps while the defenders were filling these with the felled trees. But our four friends kept well behind cover while they worked, and none of them was hit.

As it was now getting on to daylight, the besieged decided to have breakfast, and Aloys started a fire with some of the half-burnt logs, put a kettle of what water remained to them on a tripod over it to boil, and the brothers Howden toasted their last few rashers of bacon.

The convicts had ceased firing and had presumably gone off, but Hal watched through a loophole in case they attempted a fresh attack in any way.

Breakfast was just over, and the grey light of dawn was spreading through that prison valley, when Aloys, who was on watch, saw the three convicts emerge in a bunch from a grove some little way to the southward. One of them bore a white cloth on a stick.

'Hi! Hi! A flag of truce. We want to

come to terms,' came a loud shout in Jacques' voice.

Opening the gate, Hal stepped forth.

'Be careful, Hal,' said Tom. 'It may only be a trick. They have their rifles with them, and may act treacherously.'

'You may come closer,' Hal shouted to the trio. 'We won't fire on you if you don't try on any tricks. What have you to say?'

'Thank you, m'sieur,' replied Jacques.

He and the two others advanced rapidly, with their rifles at the trail, until about fifty feet away.

'We want to know if we can't come to terms, monsieur,' Jacques then sang out. 'If you'll all agree to say nothing about having met us here when you get out, we're willing to be friends again and help you to put up your ladders. You've only yourselves to thank for what's happened. You didn't treat us fairly!'

'We've reason to believe that you are escaped convicts who have committed several murders,' replied Hal. 'We don't want anything more to do with you, and we certainly are not going to trust you. I wonder you have the impudence to ask us to, after what has occurred. But if you'll promise not to molest us further, but to keep your distance, and let

us put up our ladders without interference, I'll see if the others are agreeable to leaving the ladders in place, once we are up and out of the valley, and so give you a sporting chance to get out also and away.'

'That'll suit us, m'sieur. You'll agree also not to put the Swiss police on our tracks when you get back to the towns?'

'I'll not promise that. But wait a minute, until I confer with my friends.'

Hal stepped inside the gate again, and he and his companions held a brief colloquy. Then he stepped out again.

'It would be compounding a felony, we consider, if we held our tongues about you when we got back to the towns,' he called out again. 'You are murderers, and it is our duty to lay information with the Swiss police against you at the first opportunity; and that we most decidedly will do. But listen to me! If you'll not molest us again, if you'll keep your distance and let us put up the ladders, and get out of the valley, we'll leave the ladders in place so that you can get up after us and have a sporting chance of escape.'

'All right, m'sieur! All right! That will do us. If the Swiss police can catch us once we're out of this valley, well, they're welcome to, I say,' guffawed Jacques.

' We do not intend to trust you, and I warn you that if you try on any treachery we will not spare you. If we don't shoot you down, we will take up all the ladders after us when we get out, and leave you trapped in the valley. And that's final ! '

He stepped through the gate again, and the three convicts, apparently satisfied, slouched off across the valley out of sight.

' Come,' said Hal as soon as they had disappeared, ' we'll get in a fresh supply of water while we have the chance. Then two of us can watch as before, while the other two make up for their broken sleep in the hut.'

All four went out, armed and carrying an empty cask apiece. As the nearest spring was in sight of their stockade, they did not fear the convicts trying to cut them off and seize the recess.

Refilling the casks, they returned to the bay, and took it in turn to watch and sleep until well on to noon. Hal and Dick then went to work again at their cliff-climbing ; and before dinner they had the fifth niche excavated and their sixth ladder up.

After the midday meal, consisting of the two wild rabbits, boiled in a pot, they all toiled with unremitting energy, getting up two more ladders by tea-time.

CHAPTER XII

AN ARTFUL RUSE

THE convicts had shown themselves again—at the edge of the burnt-down grove. Lighting a camp-fire there, they had something to eat and drink, and then lay down amongst the charred tree-stumps to watch our friends at work.

'They seem inclined to keep their part of the bargain,' Tom said, as he sat down to the tea he had made, beside Aloys and Hal, while Dick did 'sentry-go.' 'But, of course, there's no trusting them, and it's early yet for them to show their hands.'

'They're keeping their eyes on us,' returned Hal. 'They must see that we require at least three more ladders to reach the top. I don't expect that they'll make any move, if they do meditate treachery, until the very last minute.'

'I don't know,' observed Aloys. 'I don't think they'll risk waiting so long, in case of

another repulse, when they would be done for, of course. If they *are* going to attempt anything, I should say it will be when we've just got up our tenth ladder.'

'Yes,' concurred Dick, at his loophole. 'It will probably be dark then. As soon as night falls, if you ask *me* anything, we can look for a proper tug-of-war—a far worse scrimmage than any we've had yet. They'll be desperate, and ready to do and dare anything in order to overpower us and prevent us getting out before them.'

Hurrying over the tea, our friends got briskly to work again, anxious to make use of the remaining hours of daylight.

Aloys, perched on the top of the eighth ladder, was picking away at the rock-face, cutting the niche for the next ladder, and Hal was just below him, shovelling off the debris that fell in the cavity. They were both between one hundred and fifty and one hundred and sixty feet up the cliff.

Dick, rifle in hand, was keeping a sharp look-out at the stockade. He was watching the three forms lying by the camp-fire at the grove out across the valley; and Tom was busy nailing on rungs to a fresh ladder, as fast as he could.

In order to enable the rung-nailing to be

performed by only one of them, the two tree-trunks forming the sides of the ladder had first been secured the proper distance apart by attaching a rung at either end.

'They'll attempt nothing until dark, as I said, Tom,' observed Dick, turning from the loophole, 'that is, presuming they *do* mean to act treacherously. They are still lying by the fire at the burnt grove, taking it easy, and watching Hal and Aloys working.'

The words were barely off his lips when there came a slight rubbing sound against the outside of the stockade—a sound so slight that neither of the two young men, although so close by, heard it above the clink of the guide's pick and Hal's shovelling upon the face of the cliff.

Almost in the same instant, however, the head and shoulders of the convict Jean rose above the stockade. Pointing his rifle promptly at Dick's head, he pulled the trigger, even as the two Howdens whirled round in wild surprise at a slight noise he made. *He was without hat, coat, and waistcoat.*

Crack! rang out his piece. A jet of flame spurted from its muzzle; and with a deep groan, Dick dropped in his tracks and lay as one dead.

With a cry of awful anguish, believing his brother was killed, Tom, springing to his feet

let fly the hammer he held, at Jean. The convict ducked, and the hammer flew harmlessly over his head out on to the plain.

Tom made a frantic dash for his rifle, which lay near. But as he snatched it up, a second shot from the convict, now astride the stockade, smashed the stock close to the magazine, and the useless weapon was knocked out of his hand. Whirling about, he ran for his life back up the rock-strewn bay, towards the hut at its end.

With a fierce imprecation, Jean swung both legs over the stockade and dropped down inside. And in the same instant the savagely-exultant face of Jacques appeared behind him, over the top of the stockade.

The surprise was complete.

Hal and Aloys, high on their eighth ladder, as stated, had turned at the first shot, to behold, with unmitigated horror, what was transpiring below. Both groaned aloud as they saw Dick fall, apparently shot through the brain. Then, quick as thought, Hal threw both legs around the ladder, and, still gripping his shovel in one hand, slid down to the niche, or cavity, in which the ladder stood.

The rungs, of course, being nailed on, instead of inset, impeded his descent somewhat

and tore his clothes in places. But, alighting upon his feet in the seventh niche pretty swiftly for all that, he immediately dropped his shovel and caught up his rifle, which he had fortunately taken up with him and left there.

He as swiftly fired at Jean, who was racing after Tom.

The bullet struck the bottom of the recess a few feet from the convict, ricochetting against the cliff. But it was enough for Jean. He at once threw himself down behind a boulder and pointed his rifle up at Hal.

Aloys was sliding down the ladder now, to get *his* rifle, which was also in the niche, beside Hal.

Jacques, who *was also only in his shirt and trousers*, had been clambering over the stockade rather clumsily and painfully on account of his wounded leg, which was not quite healed. He hurriedly made shift to get back the way he had come.

Hal fired at him next to expedite his movements—not waiting to take proper aim and pick him off. The shot flew sufficiently close to give the burly ruffian a bad scare, and he almost threw himself back over the farther side of the stockade.

Crack! Zip! Smack! A bullet from Jean flattened itself against the cliff-face close by the seventh niche, and fell back into the ravine.

Aloys, however, had now got his rifle. And, kneeling side by side in the niche, beside the eighth ladder, the two aloft made to settle Jean, who could not wholly conceal himself from them behind the boulder at the height they were.

Seeing they must soon pick him off, he jumped up, ran back towards the stockade, and dived under the tree-trunks blocking up one of the gaps in it.

In order to fill the two gaps, boulders had first been piled in them, and then the ends of some of the tree-trunks had been raised on to the boulders. Thus there was a little nook under the tree-trunks, and within it, Jean could just squeeze and find shelter.

He was now completely protected by the stout trunks from the fire of his two enemies above, the more so as they were on the same side of the ravine as he was.

Tom had gained the hut at the back of the bay, and was in the act of thrusting one of the spare rifles out through its tiny window. His brother still lay prone and apparently dead, close by the gateway and Jean's hiding-place.

Hal and Aloys looked at the stockade, expecting to see the rifles of the two other convicts pointing up at them through the loopholes in it. They saw only one rifle-barrel drawing a bead on them. And then, to their utter amazement, they beheld Anatole out on the plain, about midway to the grove opposite and running at top speed, rifle in hand, towards the stockade.

Beyond him, at the burnt grove, *two motionless forms, human to all appearances, still lay beside the camp-fire* !

Hal and Aloys immediately comprehended the artful ruse which had been so successfully played upon them.

The two motionless figures by the camp-fire were *dummies*. The convicts had made up two effigies with their coats and hats to look like Jacques and Jean, who had both then crept back through the burnt stumps of the grove, and away round to one side of the bay. Anatole had remained by the fire with the dummies and walked about occasionally, the better to deceive the eyes within the stockade.

He had been left behind also because he was the fastest runner of the trio, and at the first alarm he was to cut at top speed to the aid of the two others.

Some little time before, the three had contrived a short ladder, by surreptitiously pulling down, under cover of the darkness, some of the farm-pens left standing by our four cliff-climbers. Of course, they made this ladder to enable them to scale the stockade quickly and silently; and in order not to arouse any suspicion in the minds of our friends by any hammering, they had tied on the rungs with some cord they had also secured, gouging holes in the side-bars to pass the strings through. This Hal Spencer and his companions learned later.

Hiding the improvised ladder in the blocked-up pass, the three cunning rascals had then patiently awaited a favourable opportunity of employing it.

When they crawled away back from their camp-fire, Jacques and Jean had gone as far westward as the southern end of the lake, where there was another thick grove. From that it was the easiest thing in the world for them to pass from grove to grove in a south-easterly direction—they wormed themselves like snakes through the long grass between the groves—and thus get to the blocked-up pass unseen by Dick Howden, on guard at the stockade. The projecting southern jaw of the recess prevented Dick from seeing due

south—that is, in the direction of the blocked-up pass. And carrying their little ladder between them, Jacques and Jean had then closely hugged the intervening wall of cliff, which, running north-west, was also out of sight from the stockade, so that they could steal along by it quite undetected, until right up to the recess.

Before issuing from the closed pass, however, they had waited for a signal from Anatole that the coast was fairly clear—that two of the defenders were still on the topmost ladder. Anatole had signalled *silently*, needless, perhaps, to say. He had simply taken off his hat and wiped his brow a couple of times.

On gaining the southern jaw of the recess, Jean had carefully peeped round it and seen, through the interstices of the tree-trunks blocking up the gap there in the stockade, the elder brother Howden turn away for that fateful half-minute from his loophole.

To slip forward quickly, and noiselessly set their ladder against the stockade and climb it, was the work of the next breathless instant, Jean going first as the more active of the pair, and it having been arranged beforehand that he should at once shoot dead the sentinel and whoever else was just inside. Anatole

it was who had conceived the whole thing, and it certainly reflected great credit upon his cunning. His two associates had the more readily agreed to undertake the dangerous part of the task—the surprise—as it had seemed impossible that they could fail to settle at least the two defenders who happened to be on the ground ; when, even if they could not get inside the recess, or it would not be safe to try to do so, they would have the pair on the ladders practically at their mercy, as they could shoot at these through the loopholes in the stockade.

As we have seen, Jean had got inside the bay and found refuge under the raised ends of the tree-trunks, but there, however, he was practically as helpless to assist further in the attack as he was secure from Hal's and Aloys' fire from above. Jacques had ducked down on the outside of the stockade, stepped down off his little ladder, and thrust his rifle through a loophole. Anatole was racing forward at his fastest to support his two fellow-convicts.

Hal and Aloys, being so high up the cliff-face, and but very ineffectually sheltered from Jacques' fire within the seventh niche, were in a decidedly awkward situation. With one accord, they turned their rifles on Anatole.

But he was watching them, and immediately wheeled and tore sideways—towards the same side of the recess as they were on.

Their shots missed him, and he was hidden in another moment by the corner of the cliff alongside them.

The late positions of the two opposing parties were now reversed. The besiegers were all behind cover, and two of the defenders, at least, were exposed to their fire, while another lay *hors-de-combat*, and, if not dead already, could easily be killed out of hand by a shot from any one of the ruthless foe.

It was a terrible predicament. Tom Howden in the hut, believed that they were as good as done for, expected every moment to see Hal and Aloys picked off and fall from above.

CHAPTER XIII

HAL'S DASHING FEAT

CRACK! A jet of flame and smoke streamed upward from Jacques' loophole in the stockade.

But Hal and Aloys had shrunk back as much as they could in the niche on the side next the valley, and the bullet missed them both—though by not more than a few inches—smacked against the opposite wall of the little cave, and, fired at a slight angle as it was, rebounded into the gulf below. The pair mentally congratulated themselves that they had had to dig their shelter rather deep as the face of the cliff beetled again just there.

Jacques, too, was but an indifferent marksman. He had not been able to make up his mind for some moments as to which of the two he should try to hit, had ultimately decided on the young Englishman as the more to be feared, and had then dwelt overmuch on his aim in order to make sure of it—*overmuch* because it gave his two intended victims a better chance of screening themselves.

Tom at once sent a shot from the hut-window at Jacques' loophole, but only hit the stockade. Hal and Aloys then, in succession, popped an eye and a rifle round the side of their aerial shelter and fired also at the stockade.

Another rifle barrel was thrust through this as they did so. Anatole had joined Jacques.

'It would be madness, I suppose, to try to get down,' groaned Hal. 'We are properly "treed" up here, though, and I see no way of retrieving the situation unless—Look here! I'm going to slide down!'

'It would be madness! You'll never attempt anything so foolhardy, monsieur? You will lose your hold of the rope and be dashed to pieces, if they do not pick you off. Don't think of it! Remember, we are fully a hundred and thirty feet up!'

'I shall not use the rope. I shall slide down the ladders in succession, and trust to my speed to baffle their shooting. They are not dabsters at the game.'

Before the guide could again remonstrate with him, Hal had sprung from the niche on to the ladder leading below, thrown his legs and arms round it, and was sliding down it at full speed.

He landed in the sixth niche—the one just

below on the opposite cliff-wall—before the convicts had time to recover from their astonishment and fire at him.

He carried his rifle in one hand and paused long enough in the niche to sling it upon his back, what time Aloys, above, fired again at the stockade to distract the enemy's aim.

Then down the sixth ladder in turn, the daring young Englishman slid safely; and, only waiting long enough to scramble on to the fifth ladder, he went skimming in like manner down that.

Aloys blazed away as fast as possible from aloft to cover him ; and Tom, after the first shock of surprise on seeing what he was attempting, also joined in pounding at the convicts' cover. Moreover, Tom did not neglect to send an occasional bullet at Jean's retreat, to keep that rascal from interfering.

With Jacques' and Anatole's bullets whizzing all about him, the whole air above and below him positively alive with flying lead, Hal intrepidly slid on down ladder after ladder, leaving shreds of his clothing attached in places to the sharp-edged rungs. He saved his hands by not using them at all —by keeping his arms clasped round the ladder. But his elbows and thighs smarted and burned, and his garments, at the points

of contact, were almost rubbed through where they were not torn away by the rungs.

Hurrah ! He had gained the first niche—the lowermost one of all—and there was only one more ladder for him to descend. But he reeled giddily as he scrambled on to it, and the hearts of Aloys and Tom nearly stood still, for he only just saved himself from falling.

As he slid down to earth, Tom, of course, ceased firing for fear of hitting him, and then, on the spur of the moment, most gallantly and devotedly rushed forth from the hut, to support him. But when his heels touched the earth, Hal staggered and fell in a heap.

Jacques and Anatole shouted exultantly, believing that one or more of their shots must have struck him. But, close as had been the range, his swift movements had been in his favour and he was unscathed. It was solely from dizziness owing to his whirlwind descent, that he had fallen.

What he had hoped exactly to do, on reaching the ground, all flustered and giddy and breathless as he would be, as well as right out in the open, with his three foes snugly entrenched and able to take deliberate aim at him, he probably did not know himself—had not waited to think—when he began his wild, desperate descent.

He fell, as luck would have it, behind two fair-sized boulders, which had been rolled back from the original barricade in order to form seats. Fortune generally favours the brave ; or else it is that Providence looks after such. A bold dash, too, is its own protection, as a rule ; as it disconcerts the enemy, throws him temporarily off his balance, and prevents him taking steady or accurate aim.

The boulders were not big enough to screen Hal's legs. But they served their purpose all the same, for the moment.

Jacques and Anatole, in their jubilation, shot wildly at his prostrate form, and both bullets only starred the covering fragments of rock, to rebound harmlessly high in air.

Tom Howden at once threw himself prone on the earth and pumped another shot at Anatole's loophole ; but again only to strike the stockade close beside it. His heart felt like lead within him, fully believing that both Hal and his beloved elder brother were done in. Dick had not moved since he had fallen. He surely must be dead, all the defenders believed.

Jean thought the same, and, having no wish to remain where he was cowering longer than he could help, now decided to risk being picked off by either Aloys or Tom and try to

rejoin his fellows. He scrambled swiftly out of his hiding-place, sprang on to the sloped tree-trunks, and, catching at the forked branches to support and help him, clambered madly to the gap and leaped out through it.

But, to the amazement of all the onlookers, Hal Spencer lay barely two seconds behind the sheltering boulders. Struggling to his feet, he, in grim silence, plunged, face downwards, and bent double towards the gate in the stockade. Half-blind and semi-dazed as he still was, as well as breathless, with the flurry of his swift descent of the seven ladders, he instinctively made in the right direction, though he reeled like a drunken man.

So taken aback were the three convicts outside that none of them had time to shoot at him again before he had reached the gate. And, once at it, he was safe from their fire unless they mounted their little ladder and shot over the top at him, as they could not turn their rifle muzzles at a sharp enough angle to pick him off.

Supporting himself, in his semi-exhausted state, by clinging with one hand to the gate, the daring young fellow hurriedly unbarred it with the other hand. Then, somewhat recovered by the pause, brief as it was, he flung open the gate and confronted the dumbfounded, startled trio outside.

His appearance was so wild that he looked a tower of strength and fierce determination to their terrified fancy—worked upon, as that already was, by what they had seen him do and dare. And, three to one though they were, they immediately broke back some yards from the loopholes, hardly seeming to know what to do—whether to stand and tackle him, or to bolt.

They would all three probably have thrown themselves upon him in the next instant, for he was reeling still, and fumbling awkwardly to unsling his rifle—no doubt with the idea of using it as a club at such close quarters. But their momentary hesitation was fatal to the success of their plan, and also to one of their number—their leader, or spokesman.

Aloys Reding, high in mid-air, still within the seventh niche on the opposite wall of the bay, had immediately covered Jacques when the trio sprang back from the stockade into his full view. He fired just as that ruffian was in the act of making a move—of hurling himself upon Hal.

To the re-echoing crack of the rifle, Jacques dropped like a stone in his tracks, shot clean through the head. The stricken man never as much as quivered, but lay still exactly as he had fallen.

With dismayed howls, Anatole and Jean broke from the spell that had bound them, wheeled about, and fled like hares along the base of the cliffs southward.

'Fire after them! shoot them down! Don't let them get away, Monsieur Spencer,' bawled the guide. 'Quick, Monsieur Tom, avenge your brother.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST LADDER

HAL did not fire after them, but reeled back inside the gateway and leaned weakly against the jamb. Aloys came hurrying down the ladders, and Tom Howden ran to the gate and joined his fellow-Englishman.

At sight of Jacques lying so still, with the blood pouring from his head, Tom asked in a hoarse whisper: 'Is he dead? Are you hurt at all, old man?'

'I'm all right—not hurt in any way, only a bit shaken up,' panted Hal. 'Yes, I believe he is finished. He got it clean through the head, I should think. But who can say he did not bring it on himself? Your brother, though—how is *he*, do you know?'

'I don't know. I had to come to your help. I fear the worst. Yes, Jacques is dead,' he added, after examining the body.

'We must leave his corpse here for the present while we see after Dick,' said Hal.

Hurrying back inside the stockade, they saw Aloys descending the ladders. As they bent over Dick, that supposed dead young man gave a deep groan and opened his eyes.

Jean's bullet had only just scored his scalp, rendering him unconscious instantaneously, but doing little more than breaking the skin. Had the shot been an inch lower, however, he had never spoken again in this world. The wound had bled very little. It was the shock, of course, to the brain that had struck him insensible.

'Oh, thank God he is alive!' cried Tom. 'Dick—Dick, are you all right?'

'My head aches cruelly, but I don't think there is very much wrong with me,' his brother answered, trying to get on his feet, but only to sink down again rather weakly.

'It's only a graze,' said Hal. 'He'll be as right as rain after a short rest. Get him a drink of water, Tom.'

Dressing Dick's wound, they made him go to bed straightway, in the hut. Then, leaving Tom on guard, although they did not anticipate a return visit from Anatole and Jean, Hal and Aloys carried the body of Jacques to one of the empty cattle-pens just beyond the site of the demolished châlet. They left it there, covered over with a sheet.

Both the little scaling-ladder and Jacques' rifle were put in the hut at the back of the recess. His bandolier was found to be empty, and he had only two cartridges unfired in his rifle; so it was plain that his two fellow-convicts could not have much more ammunition.

It was now getting dusk, and in any case, none of the four in the recess felt inclined for further work after what had happened.

'I don't think we'll be troubled again by Jean and Anatole,' said Hal. 'But we mustn't take any chances. We'll rig up an awning or tent here by the stockade, and you two will lie down under it. I'll take a first watch of four hours, and then call you, Aloys.'

Tom had a full night's rest, and watched from daybreak while Hal and Aloys obtained their full complement of sleep. Anatole and Jean kept away; and, after breakfasting on the remains of the rabbits, and one of the fowls broiled on a grid-iron, Hal and Aloys resumed work on the eighth niche.

Dick, shortly after, came out of the hut, declaring he felt almost himself again. They would not let him do any rock-cutting, however; but he insisted on helping them to get up the ninth ladder.

Before dinner-time they had their *tenth*

ladder up also, and had started work on the niche for their eleventh and *last* ladder, as they were satisfied it would be.

Hal and Aloys were now only twenty feet or so below the summit of the cliff on which they were perched. The opposite cliff was slightly lower, and so the next ladder should certainly take them up on to it.

'I'm going to bolt my dinner,' laughed Hal. 'I'm all eagerness to get our last ladder up and inspect the cliff-top, to see if we can get clear.'

'I don't see that there can be anything else to prevent us,' said Tom.

'We may have to contend with some deep and wide crevasse, or some other unscalable cliff, but I don't think that likely,' said the guide.

The tenth niche was declared sufficiently deep for their purpose, amid a general hurrah. And then, in the most feverish excitement, the eleventh ladder was borne by Dick and Tom to the foot of the first or lowest ladder, and attached by three of what would be its top rungs to the long, stout rope Hal and Aloys let down.

Then the two last-mentioned hauled on their end of the rope, and Dick kept the bottom of the swinging ladder clear of all obstructions,

while Tom climbed each of the other ladders in succession to fend it off from them as it was drawn up.

Thus it was got aloft, until Hal and Aloys, gripping its side-bars in their hands, were able to raise its bottom end on to the niche where they stood, and gently place it against the opposite wall of cliff.

'Hooray!' yelled Tom, who had remained in the eighth niche, as he saw that its top projected nearly a couple of yards above the brink of the precipice.

'Hooray!' echoed Hal and Aloys. And Dick on the ground below, took up the cheering, which the rocks around also re-echoed far and wide through the valley.

Reckléss of a fall from such a height—over two hundred feet—Hal was hurrying up the ladder, with Aloys holding it as firmly as he could, when the lumbering forms of three bears cut the skyline beside it!

Aloys and Tom saw them first, and gasped in horror. Then Hal, half-way up the ladder, espied them, even as one, with a growl, nosed the ladder, and then gave it a sharp tap with his paw.

'Oh!' screamed Tom, as the ladder was knocked sideways.

It was not brushed right off the verge, or

nothing short of a miracle could very well have saved Hal from being precipitated headlong to the bottom of the ravine. Fortunately the uppermost side-bar caught against the brink, but the lower one went clear of this, then jammed against the face of the precipice.

The ladder, however, was canted over at an angle of about thirty degrees, and had not Hal clung on instinctively with might and main, when he saw the bear strike the ladder, he must have been thrown off.

With the ladder in so precarious a position, it might be as hazardous for him to try to return to the niche as to go on up. His slightest movement might cause the ladder to turn right over with him, if not slither off the brink and take him to the bottom.

For a moment the hearts of all four cliff-climbers stood still. Hal's situation was enough to have palsied him with fright. He remained motionless, agonizedly waiting to see what the bears would do next. Another push upon the ladder by one of them, and he was doomed.

It seemed an eternity while he hung thus, literally poised between life and death. But actually barely half a minute elapsed, before '*crack*!' a rifle-shot rang out, and the bear, just in the act of pawing the ladder again,

tumbled over upon its back, kicking its legs feebly in the air.

Aloys had acted promptly. He had seen it was no use his trying to hold the ladder any longer. If untouched by the bears, it would remain jammed between the niche and the cliff-face, unless Hal moved upon it. He had snatched up his rifle from the back of the niche, taken steady aim in spite of his highly-strung nerves, and shot the beast through the heart.

Scared by the report, echoing and re-echoing around, and the fate of their companion, the two other bears at once ran away. And, heaving an intense sigh of relief, but feeling weak and limp, Aloys promptly dropped the rifle to his feet and held on with trembling hands again as tightly as he could to the ladder. He pressed it upward, too, with his body as well, so as to keep it jammed against the brink of the precipice.

Hal at once began to mount the rungs gingerly and carefully, so as to cause as little ' spring,' or vibration, in the ladder as possible. The ladder remained fixed, thanks to the guide's push upon it, even when his foot was on the topmost rung, and his weight therefore exerting the greatest leverage. He grasped the edge of the rock, and drew himself up and

over, to sink limply down then upon the level top.

He was safe—*safe*, on the summit, after facing death in one of its most hideous forms.

'Oh God be praised!' gasped Tom.

And there and then all four cliff-climbers returned grateful thanks to Almighty God for Hal's almost miraculous preservation.

And grand triumph was theirs! They had accomplished what they had at first deemed impossible—they had effected their own deliverance from that Prison Valley. Thanks to Hal's ingenuity, or happy idea of setting ladders alternately against either side of the recess, and their combined exertions and courageous perseverance, they had scaled the giant rock-walls which had girt them in, and the road to liberty, back to civilization and to their friends and relations, was open before them.

Well might they feel honest and just pride—jubilantly elated!

CHAPTER XV

HEAVEN'S RETRIBUTION

WHEN he recovered somewhat, Hal, drawing the ladder to the right position again, roped it securely thus to a projection in the cliff-top. The two other bears had cleared off, and could be seen by him running away across the almost level plateau that now stretched around him.

Aloys and Tom speedily joined him on the cliff-top; and the three were satisfied they could easily make their way back to civilization from it.

The trio were half-way down the ladders again when two rifle-shots were fired at them from the grove of trees near the lake. Anatole and Jean had witnessed Hal's narrow escape from afar, and now thought to pick them off on the ladders.

But Dick Howden returned the villains' fire from the stockade, and so kept the pair at long range. And the trio on the ladders hurried down as fast as they could.

'We'd better wait until it is dark before we

take our departure,' said Hal. 'Those two ruffians could snipe at us easily through the loopholes in the stockade the moment the last of us started to climb up, and they'd be almost bound then to hit one or more of us. We could do nothing to safeguard ourselves.'

They had tea, therefore, and then proceeded to collect all spare rifles, tools, et cetera, and store these in the various niches up the cliffs, so as to be beyond the reach of the two convicts on the abandonment of the bay, or recess.

Tom and Dick were driving the two sheep and goats out of the stockade—the animals had escaped injury in the fighting, being sheltered behind a projection in the rocky wall—when Hal suddenly called out excitedly:

'Look! Look here, you fellows! I do believe it's copper!'

Turning, the others saw him pointing to one of the cliff-walls. Something red and shining showed upon the rock-face! They all went to it and examined it.

'It is copper ore!' cried the guide, 'a pure oxide of copper. A vein must exist here. Your fortune is made, monsieur!'

'All our fortunes are made, you mean, Aloys! We must all share in the discovery. You see how the ore has been exposed. One

of the shots fired in through the gate of the stockade by our enemies, possibly that time the stockade was on fire, must have glanced here, chipping away the rock and laying bare the vein of copper below.'

'Hullo, it's come over very dark all at once!' exclaimed Tom. 'It's coming on to rain. I just felt a spot. Ah, look at the sky! we're in for a thunder-storm, I should say.'

Great inky clouds were rolling up overhead, and even as he finished speaking there was a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder. Big drops of rain bespattered the rock all about them. There came another, most vivid, flash of lightning, followed by a terrific crackle of thunder, and down fell the rain in torrents. It was just as if the very sluice-gates of heaven had been opened.

'Inside the hut!' shouted Hal; and all four fled, helter-skelter, to the 'lean-to' at the back of the recess.

Even as they sprang inside, the faces of Anatole and Jean showed round the southern jaw of the recess. The pair peeped through the forked branches of the trees still filling up the gap in the stockade at that side.

'Now's our chance,' Anatole whispered in French. 'Follow me quickly!'

Crouching double, he stepped round the

corner, and, gently parting the branches, wriggled flat on his stomach on to the trunk of one of the trees. The darkness had deepened, and the rain was still falling in sheets which helped to hide the stockade and everything at it from the four within the hut. A flash of lightning lit up the recess, and Anatole lay still, prone upon the tree-trunk, fearful that he must have been seen.

But no shout came from the hut, and he slid off the tree-trunk and stood upright against the adjacent rocky wall of the recess, flattening himself against it. Almost immediately, he felt a foot touch him, and knew that his fellow-convict had also got safely in, and was beside him.

Both were already drenched through with the heavy rain, the spray of which was rebounding a foot high, like hail, from the rocky floor of the recess. But they kept the magazines of their rifles sheltered under their dripping coats.

'Keep close to the cliff until I make a dash, then follow me smartly,' Anatole just breathed, as he began to sidle along. 'This storm couldn't have happened at a better time for us.'

Like two half-drowned rats, they edged along the cliff-wall, hugging it as closely as

they might, ready to rush for the ladders on discovery by the quartet in the hut. Both had still a couple of cartridges left in their rifles, and so might easily account for all four of their foes from the foot of the lowermost ladder or half-way up it. They were barefoot for the sake of noiselessness, but the hissing and gurgling of the falling rain would have prevented their being heard, even had they had their boots on.

Anatole got within three or four strides of the laddering, and, rushing at it, sprang up the rungs nimbly. Still no alarm. His fellow convict also gained the ladder; and they were both well up it when there came another vivid flash of lightning, and they stood still on the rungs, with their hearts in their mouths, believing that now at least they must have been seen. The desperate pair did not lack courage—the courage of the wild beast when cornered—and they were prepared to turn on the ladder and fire at our four friends as these came running out of the hut.

But still the convicts were undiscovered. Hal Spencer and his companions were half-blinded by the flash, and were only looking straight before them down the recess. Not one of them espied the two dark forms over-

head on the ladder. And, mounting as fast as they could, Anatole and Jean reached the first niche, and, without waiting even to glance within it, stepped on to the second ladder.

The storm was abating apparently, the rain was less heavy, and the flashes of lightning and thunder-claps less frequent, when the quartet in the hut were startled beyond measure by hearing two loud crashes high above them. As one man, they sprang out through the door, to see their topmost ladder tumbling down. It had struck the next ladder just below, and then the opposite cliff, and it now fell across the stockade with a force which rent its two side-bars apart and splintered most of the rungs.

'Ho! ho! ho! we've beaten you—done you—scored after all,' a triumphant shout in French rang down from above.

And looking up, in profound astonishment, Hal Spencer and his companions beheld the two convicts on the brink of the cliff. The two began dancing and making derisive gestures.

'They can smash down all our ladders, if they want to, by merely rolling big boulders over the edge. We cannot prevent them,' groaned Dick.

Aloys promptly jerked his rifle to his shoulder and fired at the pair. Thereupon they threw themselves prone, and, with their heads only showing over the cliff-top, fired back, a shot apiece, at our friends. The two bullets hit the floor of the recess on either side of the quartet, and Hal shouted :

'Back inside the hut! They can pick us off here.'

The four young men rushed back into the hut, and were barely within it when there came a great zigzag fork of lightning which seemed to fill the recess. No thunder-clap succeeded, but, instead, they heard something falling down, and, looking out, saw the body of Anatole strike the bottom of the recess with a sickening thud.

'He must have been struck by the lightning,' gasped Hal.

'It is Heaven's own retribution,' murmured Aloys.

They saw and heard nothing more of the other convict ; and so, waiting until the storm had wholly ceased and the rain left off, Hal, Dick, and Aloys ascended the laddering to the tenth, or highest, niche. There they unfastened the ladder just below them, drew it up and put it in the place of the one that had been thrown down by the two convicts.

Hal then went up it to the cliff-top, and the next instant called down to the two below :

'Jean's dead body is here. He was also struck by the lightning.'

Descending the ladder once more, he and Aloys and Dick replaced it in its original position, with Tom's aid, the last-mentioned mounting to the ninth niche to do so. All then returned to the bottom of the recess again.

'We'll take up the lowest ladder with us, after we have all mounted to the first niche,' said Hal. 'No need to reconstruct our broken ladder.'

Burdening themselves only with what necessaries they required, the four young men hurried up the lowest ladder, freed it from the staple, and, drawing it up after them, put it alongside the next ladder.

Hal and Aloys then climbed to the tenth niche, and got the ladder up and set it against the cliff-top.

Thus they were all able to mount to this ; and, temporarily burying the body of Jean under a pile of heavy boulders to protect it from wild animals, they set off across the mountains for Liddes, the nearest town.

They arrived there before daybreak, and caused a great sensation, as they had been

given up as lost and search parties had been scouring the Alps for them.

Needless to say, their story awakened even deeper interest, and police were at once sent to the Prison Valley, to bring in the corpses of the three convicts. The police took a rope-ladder with them, to descend from the lowermost niche into the recess. Later, the bodies of Aloys' uncle and cousin were recovered with drags from the lake.

Our three young English friends and Aloys registered the copper-mine they had so oddly discovered in the valley; the blocked-up pass into this was cleared, and Reding was made manager of the mine. It proved to be most productive, the layer being seventeen feet high and very wide, and workable like a quarry.

Hal, Dick, and Tom frequently run over to Switzerland to see Aloys and it, and the quartet live over once again their thrilling adventures when walled in by the giant cliffs.